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Pack Station

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PACK STATION

By

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Bachelor of Arts in English, San Francisco State University, 1978

Professional Paper
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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in Creative Writing

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Prologue

He was as broken-down an old horseshoer as I had ever met, but by God could he shoe a horse. How he did it seemed to be some mystery acquired over a lifetime of bending over beneath a million horses and mules. And yet maybe there wasn't any mystery at all. Maybe it was simply that over the course of those million or so animals he'd lost the hesitation and doubt and fear the rest of us struggled with from time to time, and just got shoes on the damn things—though with as much beauty and skill as a guy could have ever hoped for.

I bring this up because the last time I saw the old man he crawled out from under a horse, pulled the pipe from his mouth, pointed its stem at my face, and said: "Son, you're more dangerous to a horse at this point in your career than you are any good. If you take my advice, you'll get your ass up to some pack station as far into the mountains as you can go. Get a hold of some guy that has sixty or seventy head of stock that needs shoeing; some guy don't give a goddamn whether a shoe comes off now and then so long as you're there to nail it back on. You do that for two or three seasons, then maybe you can come down outa the hills and tackle some kid's backyard pony without crippling it."

Well, of course I was hurt. Who ever likes to hear the truth, plainspoken and direct as it was, coming from the mouth of some lonely old fart who couldn't even stand up straight or take a healthy breath without coughing. Right then I did the only pride-saving thing that any young man would have done who had the sand to do what was right under the circumstances.

I took his advice.

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The following Spring, high in California's eastern Sierra mountains, I sat on the top rail of a corral with a sick feeling in my stomach. Beside me, Merle Edwards laughed as he counted the circling mass of unshod mules and horses below. Already two whiskeys into his day and nursing his third, the pack station owner gave me an exaggerated wink, his eyes red and watery.

"Kinda makes your back hurt just lookin' at it, don't it, boy?"

Finding no way out, the pack animals formed into one swirling body like a helicopter-driven herd of elk. As they whirled past he called out their names:

"Crankcase, Rodent, Blue Belle, Zig-Zag, Freakout, Michelob, Alpo!"

Squinting through the dust, Merle yelled at the man sitting to my left: "I come up with sixty-six, Benny. What do you get?"

In the on-going stampede, the undulating surge of ears and heads and panic-stricken eyeballs seemed somehow independent of the river of bodies and hooves below. As clods rained on our hats the bookkeeper yelled back: "Hell, I don't know. You gotta be kidding me!"

Kidding? I thought. If there was anything funny in all that commotion it was lost somewhere behind the smell of Merle's breath and that rising cloud of horseshit and dust. Not one of those horses and mules looked any more ready to have their feet picked up and worked on than they were to be corralled and counted. And besides, out there were approximately 264 hooves that needed to be sculpted and shod, unassisted, by me. After only a few hours on the job, I could see that I was in for a long summer.

It was more than a hunch, a lot more. Earlier that morning, as we filed from the cookhouse and gathered by the hitching rails, a sound started to echo off the nearby cliffs from somewhere down the canyon. At first only a distant rattling of wood and metal, the noise began to take shape until out of a cloud of smoke and dust an old stock truck appeared with our first load of horses and mules from winter pasture down in the Owens Valley.

Up until then, I'd carried a clear picture in my mind of what a good-looking string of pack animals ought to look like. Having grown up in a household where vacations meant extended stays in the wilderness, I began going on backcountry pack trips at an age when everything seemed grander and more impressive. As a kid I watched those horses and mules all loaded up big and pretty march down the trails like a squad of armed Marines. In the years since, the pack animals I'd seen as a shoer came to remind me of the sleek, sixteen-hand beauties filing down Colorado Avenue every year in Pasadena's Rose Parade, obediently following in lock-step, looking neither to the left nor right, awaiting the next command. They were rich people's pets, suburban riding mules mostly, that were as well cared for as their cars and maybe even their suburban kids, and they all had farriers who were a whole lot better than me, so I always saw them from a little bit of a distance.

But what turned and backed to the loading chute that morning outside the cookhouse more resembled a cartoonist's idea of an equine prison bus. Bought and traded over the years from pack station to pack station for next to nothing (depending I suppose on which owner was hurting the most), that first load, and the ones that followed, were stunted and skinny and covered in wire cuts, some healed but some still raw and weeping. The hair

from their late-winter coats hung like half-shed antler velvet. Several limped and stumbled and coughed. Half had split or frozen-off ears. And at least two appeared to have only one eye, which I found out wasn't so bad as long as I didn't ever do anything near their blind side. Not even whisper.

Yet the most common attribute among the pack animals that morning was their ability to maintain a constant level of unbridled panic and fear. One terrified little mule, now attempting to climb out over the cab of the truck, had a large swastika and a playboy bunny branded on her flanks. Nazi Bitch, I learned, always had to be first in line in a string or a guaranteed world-class trail wreck was sure to follow—as I was to find out the hard way a month later, when for three hours one night I picked Rice-a-Roni and camera lenses and fly rod pieces out of a vertical manzanita forest, while a cold and hungry family sat in the dark and wondered where their packer had gone.

While I stood there watching to see if she was going to make it out of the truck, a skinny high school kid in a white T-shirt and a straw cowboy hat jumped from the cab. Heading over to Merle, he mimicked a cowboy's bow-legged swagger and spit a long arc of tobacco juice into the dirt.

"That truck ain't gonna make it more'n one more trip at most, Merle," he shouted, pulling off his hat and wiping the sweat from his forehead. "The motor's like a spoon got down the garbage disposal."

Merle smiled patiently. "Do whatever you gotta do, Danny. We're bringing them all up today, and you're the one that's going do it."

Danny looked back at the smoking truck. “But what about oil? I put in a couple quarts every five miles. For Chrissake I can’t keep up. It’s gonna blow for real this time, Boss!”

But the poor kid’s complaint fell on deaf ears. Merle squinted at the splintering boards that made up the truck’s sides until the little mule fell back into the bed of the truck and the commotion subsided.

“I don’t want to hear the word ‘can’t,” he said loud enough for us all to hear. “Buy some more oil then, goddamn it. But quit talking about it and JUST GET THE JOB DONE!”

Well, right then I started to piece together how much this little speech on the merits of perseverance was going to apply to me as well. I’ll admit these were animals that a packer often had to wrestle into packsaddles and coax along a trail without help. Since we almost always took out a pack string and went into the wilderness by ourselves, out there we simply had no choice. It was just how things were done. But shoeing them after they’d been out to pasture for eight months in the desert, becoming about as wild as the Tule elk they shared the draws and arroyos with, seemed to me to be a guaranteed rodeo. To say the least, it called for what I’d hoped would be a team approach. And yet, as I heard him say “just get the job done,” I had a feeling that sure enough, like it or not, I was on my own. The funny thing was, I’d wanted all along to work in those mountains to be by myself, and now I was getting what I’d wished for.

That evening, the stock truck pulled into the yard and backed to the loading chute with its fifth and final load. There was a loud backfire, and thick blue smoke enveloped the entire west end of the corral. After a second loud explosion, the engine died, and for the

fifth time that day Danny leaped from the cab waving smoke from his face. Roaring with laughter, Merle tore off his hat and threw it into the air.

“Thank you, Jesus!” He yelled at the canyon walls above, both arms raised to the sky. Then he broke into an impromptu dance that quickly ended in a coughing fit.

“We’re in business, boys and girls!”

I stared ahead through the smoke in disbelief, tasting again the dehydrated scrambled eggs I’d floated in Tabasco sauce twelve hours ago at breakfast. Motor oil now freely flowed to the ground from what was left of the engine’s gaskets, and I watched to see if the old truck would erupt into flames before the stock made it out. Beside me on the corral post was Merle’s plastic whiskey mug. On it, COWBOY UP was printed out in big red letters.

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That was the first thing I learned in that summer of 1981: Merle rarely saw what I thought were certain disasters as anything but amusing obstacles, as if without them there would be no good stories to tell. Pack trips that went smoothly were for the most part forgotten, while those that had been epic tragedies became, over time, the savored stuff of legend. Broken saddles, lost fingers, drowned mules, nights spent under trees in freak snowstorms—these were what people talked about. Happier times were frozen in dust-covered photos of folks holding strings of trout or pointing up at distant peaks from horseback.

After the stock arrived that first day we set about opening up the winter-closed buildings and sheds. Removing the plywood covers from windows, stuffing tumbleweeds into burn barrels, sweeping mouse droppings and spilled grain from the cold cement floors in the tack barns, we raked and oiled, hammered boards back in place, replaced light bulbs, and began scraping and painting the forest-green window and door frames on the cookhouse. We also started what Merle called “horse beautification.”

One by one the horses and mules were caught up and led out of the corral to the long hitching rail in the center of the yard. There they were hosed down, had their manes and tails brushed out and trimmed, and got their shots and wormer paste—or at least that was the intended goal. By noon we had only made our way through a half-dozen of the mules we could catch, and not one did so without a fight.

Through it all Merle sat on a bench watching us work while he smoked one cigarette after another and nursed his tall mug of Old Sunny Brook and Coke. His wife Shirley sat

beside him, crocheting. At her feet a small white dog barked at the horses and whined for the treats she carried in her pockets. At five foot four and three hundred seventy-five pounds, Shirley was by far the biggest woman I had ever seen.

Benny, our bookkeeper, came over and sat beside Merle, his pants and shirtsleeves wet from bath detail at the hitching rail. A lifelong bachelor, Benny had been the bartender in June Lake since his tour of duty in Vietnam ended a decade earlier. Tobacco thin, pale and rheumy-eyed, over the years he had said yes more and more to the inevitable offers of drinks from his bar patrons, until during a rare physical at the Bishop clinic Dr. Hopkins had turned at the door and said: “Benny, you’re wearing out. If you have any more drinks you’re through. You need to quit, my friend. Now.”

As luck would have it, the bar was empty that same afternoon. When Benny returned to work, Merle and Shirley came through the door for a quiet drink on their way home from grocery shopping in Mammoth Lakes. Not long into their visit, there was a pause in their conversation and Benny came right out and asked if he could have a job, saying he was tired of living in a bar, that he needed to get out and do something away from the life of drinking.

He’d been in-country during the war, and his job had been in materials management, where he had typed and filed letters and reports, overseeing the flow of supplies. Merle’s mother had been the pack station’s bookkeeper for over thirty years, and since her death these tasks had become the one part of managing the outfit that Merle had grown to hate. Benny’s offer to take over the year-long job of correspondence and money management, as well as pitching in as an extra hand with the horses and mules, had been like a gift from heaven.

Sitting in the shade beside Merle, Benny opened a can of Mountain Dew, lit a cigarette, and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his bandana. At just over nine thousand feet elevation, the thin dry air along the eastern Sierra front goes through rapid night and daytime changes in temperature, with the days in early spring becoming uncomfortably bright and hot by mid-day. We had started working that morning in our long johns and coats. But by nine o'clock, the sun made its way down to the granite bench where the pack station stood between the June Lake loop road and the eastern Yosemite trailhead. One after another the mule deer that had been feeding in the rabbit brush beyond the outhouse drifted off into the aspens along the creek. By lunchtime I was under my second horse and my shirt was soaked with sweat. When I finished with him around one o'clock, I went into the cookhouse where our cook, Denise, had saved a sandwich and some chips for me beneath a paper towel.

Against her better judgment, Denise had signed on that summer with her husband Paul, a young packer who'd tried to make it several years earlier as a pack station horseshoer. That was, until a quiet little mule named Gladys moved his jaw around to where his ear ought to be with one quick cow kick he hadn't seen coming.

During breakfast, with the background whine of AM country blaring from her radio over the stove, Denise stood in the kitchen door watching us eat, in her hand a long menthol cigarette held high against the door frame. She had a "what the hell do I care what you think" attitude that she was able to pull off in spades, in part because she was simply the prettiest girl any of us had ever seen in the mountains. Her attempt to hide behind Paul's baggy blue jeans, torn t-shirts, and oversized sweaters had the opposite

effect on us guys, who alternated between watching her move and looking at Paul, wondering how he did it and trying to mask our “you lucky son of a bitch” looks.

But baby-sitting five men for the summer was not exactly what she had in mind when she and Paul were offered the dual job during the previous winter. Denise worked as a manicurist part time in Bishop where Shirley had her hair done every week. Since Merle and Shirley were desperate for a cook, preferably one who would last the whole summer—a rare event indeed—the offer Shirley made as her fingertips softened in the little pan of warm soap water had been too hard for Denise to turn down. Like most young couples in the valley without a college education, the prospect of a job with free room and board and the chance to work together was a rare opportunity indeed. To Denise there was also the outside chance that one of the new hires would bring along a girlfriend or a wife to keep her company. But here she was three months later, staying more out of loyalty to Paul than anything else, with no women around other than Shirley. The reality of what was essentially a man’s world was setting in, and Denise didn’t seem too happy about it.

The truth was that she wasn’t much of a cook either, a fact that even those of us who had been eating out of cans since we’d left home could agree on. For the first three weeks we ate either cold cereal or powdered eggs for breakfast, with daily lunches of bologna sandwiches with Velveeta cheese and chips washed down by gallons of Kool-Aid. For supper, our meals were built around cheap ground beef and reconstituted potatoes and whatever else could be dumped out of a can. Each evening a small limp salad appeared beside our plates, on which she had pumped the same viscous fluorescent French dressing. Certainly none of us dared say anything to her, like how much we’d

like a vegetable now and then instead of just various forms and colors of grease and sugar and glue. But out of politeness to Paul and sheer admiration of both her gutsiness and good looks, after our suppers we'd slip off to our beds one by one with a polite "thank you."

It turns out that what bothered Denise most was how after a lifetime of being told how beautiful she was, after years of having men trip over curbs in her presence, and after being assured of a glamorous life in the city, here she was instead at the end of a dirt road as far from an exciting life as she could get. In the long run, it was Paul's love of the mountains and of a wrangler's life, not hers, that had won out.

Somehow by that first morning she already knew I had spent several years in the city going to school, and so she treated me to a twinkle out of the corner of her bright green eyes whenever I looked her way, as if I possessed some special knowledge of the outside world. I had seen the lights and the restaurants and the cable cars and the buildings, the admixed river of races and cultures and styles, and felt the intangible energy of all of those people living in one place. I had been there.

After eating lunch alone I put my plate and coffee cup in the sink, scaring up the flies, and wandered out into the main room to look at the framed pictures that covered the walls. For more than forty years the pack station had been host to fishermen and hunters and backcountry enthusiasts. Some were minor Hollywood celebrities that I recognized but didn't know the names of, and some—stars from the heyday of cowboy films—were clearly recognizable above their lavish autographs: Jack Palance, Roy Rogers, Richard Farnsworth, and Ann Rutherford. But most were pictures of ordinary folks standing around campfires, dwarfed by the surrounding mountains.

One was the picture of a woman, taken in the fifties, who had tall cuffs on her jeans and wore a red gingham shirt with a matching red bandana tied around her neck. Against the backdrop of the mountains, she stood over the body of a heavily antlered buck, a lever action rifle in her hands. She stared into the camera with a look I remembered seeing long ago in my mother's eyes—one that seemed to contain a self-assured and redemptive sense of joy hidden in the out-of-doors amid the silence, the thin air, and that cleansing smell of rock and pine and ice and snow.

But instead of a rifle it was a slender knife, used as the ruler alongside thirty years of back country trout, that I remember in my mother's hands. Unsheathed and bloody, it appears at random on wet granite slabs or held aloft for comparison with some prized catch in the bright glare of high altitude. In one of my favorite pictures, a still-life anatomy lesson, she is pointing the tip of the knife blade at the contents of a trout's fully opened underside. My mother's mouth is open in mid speech, saying, "This is the heart. These are its lungs, these its egg sacks." Then she'd cut open their stomachs so that my sister and brother and I could see the caviar of dark insects the fish had eaten: the ants and mosquitoes and the occasional dragon fly. But mostly it was ants that she spread across her palm, the large black wood ants fallen from decaying logs along stream banks and lakesides. She alone must have cleaned the fish all those years until I was old enough, for it is always my mother's squinting, smiling face in the sun above those long forgotten strings of rainbows, brookies and goldens; always her wet thumbs deep beneath their entrails sliding forward from vent to gills; and her joyful grin caught tending a frying pan of fish over a fire. Of course, it was my father holding the camera, but it was

my mother who loved to fish and share that love with us kids who drew the camera's attention.

As I turned to leave, Denise appeared beside me, the tiny flame from her lighter touching the end of her cigarette. "So if you got an education, what're you doing here?" she asked, blowing smoke off to the side.

I answered without thinking. "I have a friend in San Francisco. When I told her that I was going to leave for the summer to work up here, she joked that maybe I had lost my mind."

"Well, have you?"

"Her name is Ruth." I went on. "Are you ready for this? A week from today she will be going to a nude poetry reading where Allen Ginsberg and Baba Ram Das will be reading and chanting in front of an audience of two thousand naked people at the Masonic Hall in San Francisco. Whenever she goes to these sorts of things she climbs to the stage and dances there off to the side with her long chestnut hair swaying to the rhythm of the tambala and sitar. She tried to send me here with a summer's supply of soy paste and tamari."

Denise smiled. "You didn't answer my question."

I looked back at the glassy eyes of the deer in the picture, and those of the woman holding the rifle. Maybe I *was* crazy. "I don't know," I said. "Maybe so."

Denise tapped her cigarette into an ashtray on the windowsill. "And what could you possibly have in common with some hippie girl living in San Francisco other than sex?"

I had to think that one over. I thought about all of the times I had driven down to Ruth's place in the Haight, exhausted after pulling shoes and trimming feet in Napa and

Sonoma, stinking of horses, and how she would lie there beside me and tell me how much she loved me in spite of how I felt about life in the city. In her narrow apartment, overlooking Golden Gate Park's forest of trees, her cats and I maneuvered among stacks of magazines, record albums, newspapers, art projects, musical instruments, cookbooks, photographs, concert posters, and piles of letters and packages from friends and relatives. Window sills were laden with Amerind crafts, Mexican curios, seashells and rocks and bits of driftwood picked up, fingered and treasured as talismans. Coffee mugs sprouted bouquets of feathers. Bunches of dried roses from countless Grateful Dead concerts hung upside down from roof beams and window frames. For Ruth, as in Denise's dreams, the rich stew of humanity in San Francisco was intoxicating.

Late at night, Ruth and I would often be the last ones at a table covered with empty serving dishes and dirty plates, alone in a sudden and delicious silence that I savored as much as her cooking. When we met I was 24. She was 29, and one of the happiest people I'd ever known. Yet more and more often, for reasons even I couldn't explain, I'd find myself making the long drive eastward out of the city, crossing the central valley and the Sierra during the night, and cruising alone into the vast expanse of sage beyond Reno as the stars faded from the sky. Out there somewhere beyond the lights, I'd park and watch dawn break over the empty Nevada desert and feel the dry wind in my face, shivering away the city as if I had made it safely through a wreck of some sort and come out the other side okay. Even at 24 the power of being held by a girl was giving way to the intoxication of being utterly alone and away from everything. How could I explain to Denise how I felt if I couldn't even explain it to myself? I wanted to tell her what I saw in the eyes of that woman in the photograph, what I remembered growing up in the eyes

of a mother, but it was something that could not be explained in words. That feeling in the wilderness was not limited by arguments and disappointment and daily, inevitable emotional changes. I simply knew it would always be there.

“We’re both believers,” I answered her finally, this time thinking about what I was saying.

“Oh, religious believers. I get it. Well, that’s good. Good for you guys. Like in God, right?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

She put out her cigarette and crossed her arms. For the first time I saw her frown. “But I still don’t know why you’re here, when you could be doing something better. People like Merle and Benny and Danny might as well come from another planet as far as you’re concerned. This is the best they can do, it’s all they’ve got.”

I began to sense the same frustration that Ruth had shown when I left, when I leaned over the side of her bed and kissed her on the forehead and said goodbye. Now it was coming from someone I didn’t even know, someone I knew as little as I knew myself.

As I turned to leave the cookhouse, I gave her the same lame answer I had given Ruth. “I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve yet to find the playbook that’ll tell me how to live and where I belong. In the meantime, I need to get out there and keep nailing on shoes.”

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Back out in the yard I grabbed the next gentle horse that came through the “beautification” line, and continued shoeing. In a way shoeing was not such a bad job to have those first few days, since I stayed away from most of the minor rodeos going on between the corral and where the others worked at the hitching rail. Many of the horses and mules simply lay down or flipped themselves over while tied, and ended up hanging from their lead ropes. A total of six broke free and ran to the main meadow in the canyon between the pack station and June Lake, and had yet to be caught up and brought back. Others were sent to a side corral where they were left hog-tied in the sun for a few hours until they’d had a chance to think things over and settle down. There they were “sacked out,” slapped and rubbed with a gunny sack until they became resigned to the touch and movement of the burlap against their hides. Other gunny sacks filled with empty cans were dragged around inside the corral among the livestock to get them used to unfamiliar noises. Tarps were flapped in the air or laid on the ground beneath their feet to prepare them for potential tarp encounters in mountain camps. Sheets of corrugated plastic, which they had to step on in order to take a drink, were placed on the ground in front of their water troughs. In general, any kind of benign stimulation imaginable was used as we readied them for summer use.

During that first week we also started packing school. I could handle myself around a horse, but the thousands-year-old art of packing a heavy load on an animal and keeping it there was new to me. For everyone else it amounted to a refresher course on how to saddle, pack and load the pack animals with everything from card tables and propane

tanks to sleeping and duffle bags and food. But since we all had to join in, I didn't feel like the only novice, even though at first I sure underestimated how much practical experience and know-how went into getting people's things safely into and out of the backcountry.

Merle first put out aluminum folding chairs, fishing poles, duffle bags, several cans of stove gas and long handled axes, along with salt and mineral blocks, and a hay bale or two. For good measure he added several large spools of wire and a half-dozen treated fence posts. Then he had us all gather in front of the tack shed and pack it aboard Cruiser, one of our big steady mules.

For the better part of two afternoons we each loaded the heavy canvas side bags—called panniers—on sawbuck saddles and top-loaded the items that wouldn't go into the panniers. After we tarped the loads and diamond-hitched them down snug, we watched as Merle led Cruiser around the yard to see how balanced the loads were. Later we took out several Decker saddles—a more recently configured, single cinch version of the traditional double-rigged sawbuck saddle—and practiced basket hitching several large propane tanks and a pair of hay bales. We were unusual for California in that we used both types of saddles, depending on what we had to pack; but we relied on the sawbucks, and the stiff canvas panniers sewn with heavy leather corners and bottoms. Finally, Merle showed us how he wanted to see the lash ropes coiled when not in use, and how things were to be put up and stored in the field to keep them out of the weather and away from the gnawing teeth of rodents and porcupines.

After he thought we had a good idea of how to pack a string, we took all fifty-four riding saddles and seventy pack saddles out of the tack shed, three or four at a time, and

cleaned each piece of leather with saddle soap before oiling both saddles and bridles with Neatsfoot oil. The job took two days, with us all pitching in and working hard, and we finished with cramps in our hands and our skin reeking like rancid oil.

That night, my little dog Cleo got into what was left of the large can of leather oil and drank it dry, supposing, I'm sure, she had gotten away unseen with a criminal act that was worth every swallow. For the next twenty-four hours, with a look over her shoulder of woeful contrition, she continued to pose around the property's periphery, hunched in agony, long after she was as clean throughout as a glass pipette.

For me there was still work to be done. And so alone and off to the side, under the big cottonwood tree by the tack shed, I kept my head down and got into a steady rhythm, beginning with the horses and mules that seemed calmest.

Going around each horse counter-clockwise, first trimming the feet and getting them level, then shaping and leveling the shoes for each foot, I repeated my counter-clockwise course nailing them on and clinching off the nails. When holding a front hoof between the knees, about the worst thing that can happen if a horse blows up is the horse pulling its foot from your grip as it rears up and backwards when a nail has just been driven and the sharp point projecting from the outside wall of the hoof has not been wrung off by the claw on the nailing hammer. Years later my worst injury occurred when a horse suddenly pulled its hoof away as I was nailing on a shoe, and sliced open the length of my left palm like the belly of a trout.

The hind feet, especially with mules, were harder to hold onto. Once pulled free they could be quickly aimed in the horseshoer's direction. That happened less often than it may appear, since it was fairly easy to bend the hoof back in a kind of wrist lock and hold

on until the horse or mule gave up and relaxed. The part of the job that took years to develop was sculpting and angling the bottom of each hoof so that it would land at a proper angle when they came into contact with the ground. This, and shaping a shoe to match, took patience and a good eye that got better only over time.

When I began that year I was not used to shoeing more than two or three horses a day, and I had never built up much in the way of calluses. It wasn't long before my hands began to blister and the small scrapes and cuts that come as a matter of course when shoeing began to add up. By the end of the second week my hands were taped up like a boxer's, and it was obvious I needed help if we were to get all sixty-seven head done before the beginning of the packing season, only a week away. After supper, when Merle came up to me and told me he had called a friend of his down in the Owens Valley, my feelings weren't hurt in the least.

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Howard Fry was one of those quiet, unassuming shoers most of the good ranchers called upon when they needed above-average farrier work done. He was also one of the kindest, most patient guys I ever worked with.

So it came as a surprise when he told me that he was working on his fifth marriage. His most recent wedding, to a thirty-year-old barrel racer named Linda, had taken place the previous summer during a lull in the competition at Bishop's Mule Days. How someone as laid back and responsible as Howard could be a failure as a husband was at the time a complete mystery to me. Only years later did I come to recognize the life of a horseshoer as similar to that of a merchant seaman or itinerant drifter. The constant exhaustion, the seasonal work that fell off during the winter months, the failure of a certain percentage of one's customers to pay their bills, the inevitable injuries, and a tendency to drink away the days' bumps and bruises were just some of the factors that even the most affable and conscientious farriers have to contend with. As everyone who has stuck with the trade long enough will attest, a person's marriage is the first thing to suffer when the pitfalls of a horseshoer's life begin to get the upper hand.

But in spite of the ups and downs, the one constant in Howard's life had been his humble dedication to the shoeing trade. As a result, he had been under so many head of livestock that he had acquired a remarkable way with the rough ones. He alone taught me more than anyone else how to get in there and get the job done no matter how pretty it looked, and by the end of the second week, between the two of us, we had shoes on every horse and mule on the place.

Before he left for home he told Merle he'd like to go on one "horseyback ride" before heading back down to Bishop. It happened that there was a one-day packing job to deliver sacks of sand and cement over the pass. So with Merle's help, Howard and I loaded up two strings, totaling ten mules, and led them to a Forestry Service trail crew at the outlet of lake Alger. There a contracting engineer and his two sons were cementing in a culvert with an irrigation gate so that the water level could be regulated for use downstream by the town of June Lake.

That morning, Howard and I followed a trail that began behind the pack station and soon led up to a long series of steep switchbacks known as Angel's Flight. With the excess weight, the steepness of the trail, and the out-of-shape condition of the mules, every couple hundred yards or so one of the pack loads would begin to slip off balance, requiring us to stop and either retie our loads or slip a counterbalancing rock into the heavy canvass panniers.

About a mile and a half up the mountain, the trail quickly became nothing more than smooth rock and talus. Before us, the roots of bristlecone pines, often a foot or more in width, crossed the trail at odd angles like fallen timber. Here, the wind blew hard and cold, numbing our faces and hands. Unfortunately, we were approaching as bad a place as anywhere in the High Sierra to slip and fall.

Letting Howard take the lead, at our last load-balancing stop he told me of several catastrophic mule-string accidents that had occurred at this place in the past. In one accident an entire string had fallen to their deaths after one panic-stricken mule had set back on its lead rope and pulled the rest of the string along with it off the mountain.

Looking down at the rusted streaks left on the rock by years of slipping mule shoes, I squeezed my hands to bring the blood back into my fingers while fighting back the urge to rein in my horse.

At the last half-mile before the abrupt lip of the pass we came to an almost vertical expanse of glacial-polished granite on which a narrow staircase of granite shelves had been blown out of the cliff face with dynamite. As our pack animals began to lunge, one by one, toward the sky, Howard looked over his shoulder and down his string of mules and started to laugh.

“Come on kid,” he yelled into the wind. “Smile, will ya? You’re scaring *me*!”

Two hours later, when we approached camp, we were greeted by Red Ballinger, a tall, bearded man who gave each of us a vigorous handshake and asked about our trip up over the pass. He and the rest of his crew of college-age kids were eating a late lunch and taking a break from the wind beneath several large Jeffrey pines. At an elevation of over ten thousand feet, the weathered juniper trees resembled large ornamental bonsai. From their camp we had a spectacular view of the lake below and several twelve-thousand-foot peaks in the immediate distance, including Ritter and Banner and Mt. Davis.

“You two have more balls than I have,” he said, laughing. “No shit, that first stretch of trail scares me even on foot.”

While we dismounted and began to unload our sand and cement, the women in the crew came over to see the mules and, it seemed, to check out the guy riding with Howard. Deeply tanned and athletic, they had signed on to spend the summer breaking and carrying heavy rock in the absence of any males other than Red and his two young boys.

I could see myself reflected in a half-dozen pairs of mirrored sunglasses as I rolled and tied on the cover tarps and lash ropes for our eventual trip home.

Getting out our sack lunches, we joined them in their camp. They had on a pot of rather passable coffee that took some of the sting out of the cold in our hands. Howard was a shy one and kept out of the conversation for the most part. It was his one day to relax and leave the social life behind, and I couldn't blame him for keeping our visit short.

On our way back he stopped at the pass and got off his horse. Motioning for me to join him at the cliff edge, he got down on his haunches and rattled a handful of small stones in his hand as he looked out over the succession of snow-capped, granite ridges to the south. Below us, the late afternoon sun reflected off several lakes. Howard ran his fingers through his hair, combing it back, and replaced his hat. He let a long period of silence go by as we simply drank in the open landscape before us.

"When I'm driving up and down that valley, glued to someone's bumper heading to my next job," he said, finally, "I look up and think how nice it would be to be up here alone instead. I really do."

But we both knew that the packing season lasted only four, or at the very most five, months out of the year. Because the passes were still deep in snow, during the months of June and early July business involved mainly equipment preparation and occasional day rides around the aspen belt above the valley floor. But during late July, August, and September there was little time to sleep. When one pack string returned another went out. Then the pack station was in true seven-day-a-week overdrive. With the coming of the chill in the air, and as schools began to open, vacationing families disappeared and

were replaced by small parties of hunters who arrived first to scout and, later, to take game in the high country.

Fall was by any estimation the best time of year. The crowds had disappeared along with the insects and the heat, and with the change in colors and the shortening of the days came the frosty mornings and cold nights. In the evenings we lit fires in the large pit between the cookhouse and the corrals and sat on a circle of logs and watched the stars appear in the night sky above the flames. Although at times the days of hard work would seem endless, eventually we'd begin to close up in anticipation of snowfall, when the pack season and our jobs would be over. A married man with a family to support needed year round work in one place with one clientele. And so for Howard, the father of six children by four different wives, the lure of working in the high country remained only a dream.

Looking out over the landscape toward Mono Lake and the Mono Buttes, feeling the dry wind in our faces, a good hour went by with neither of us saying anything. It was a view I have never forgotten.

Every summer, my family spent several weeks in the Sierra while my father photographed the high country. We often began and ended our trips at one of the trailheads far to the south in the Owens Valley, where Howard now lived. After we had starved in the thin air above timberline, and then coasted in one long switch-backed descent into the heat of the valley below, we bought cheeseburgers and milkshakes and fries from the hamburger stand at the north end of the town of Independence. Across the street was a park with weathered wooden picnic tables under towering cottonwood trees

that blew above us in the constant desert wind. After two weeks of nuts and prunes and dehydrated dinners that had little taste or substance, the food was delicious and we ignored the yellow jackets and the horseflies and the roaring semis that lifted our papers and the dust from the side of the highway.

Howard and I were both drawn to this land—as harsh as any in the west, and as beautiful. Knowing that this was his last day at the station, I thought back over the things he had said while we worked on either side of the big stump-mounted anvil beneath the cottonwood tree. How what I needed most was to simply stick to it and get a lot of feet under my belt. How every foot I picked up would be different, that some would fall apart just looking at them, and some would be so hard that I couldn't get a nail in no matter what. He said that every horse and mule had a different personality, like people or dogs or anything else, and that I needed to figure out a way to get along with every one of them. That since they are bigger than I am, I couldn't out muscle them. I'd have to out think them instead. No matter how big a guy is, he said, the only advantage he will ever have over a thousand pound animal is his brain.

In spite of his apparent wisdom when it came to horses and mules, when I thought about how many times he had been married, I figured that perhaps getting along with women—something I was also learning at the time—was another skill altogether. It was certainly a heady realization that a master of such kindness and patience and intuition was nevertheless an apparent novice at the art of maintaining a relationship with a fellow human being. Maybe for that there were no easy precepts, like there were for shoeing, except that decency and sheer diligence alone were insufficient in the absence of luck—a

scary thing to depend on in any endeavor, whether it be mating, mule shoeing, driving on a freeway, or riding over a rocky pass.

As shadows began to creep across the valley, we hiked back over to where we'd tied our horses, mounted up, and led the two mule strings back down off the mountain toward the vertical drop of Angel's Flight. When I later thanked him for coming up and helping me out with the shoeing, he laughed, patted me on the shoulder, and reminded me that he had been paid.

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My home that summer was a plywood shack on the southwest corner of the property. Beyond its wooden walls lay nothing but sage and rabbit brush for roughly three quarters of a mile, then the abrupt granite wall of the basin where the stock trail began to climb. Nearby, a stand of aspens rustled even when the wind seemed still. On one side of my shack, a colony of ground squirrels made their home in a pile of discarded haywire about ten feet high. Whenever I opened the door to leave or returned from the yard outside the cookhouse, they called out a piercing series of chirps and disappeared into their wire fortress. They seemed to have a perfect and invincible set up. On the other side of my shack a wide hole in the ground led under my floor, which Cloe growled into whenever we passed.

During breakfast on the second morning, I asked about the hole and what sort of animal made its home there. Benny put his fork down. It had been his shack the year before and it was obvious I'd been relegated a place of semi-honor by having a place of my own. He looked over at Merle: "You want to tell him about Oscar?"

"No, you go right ahead," Merle answered.

"It doesn't smell. Can't be a skunk. Is it a badger?" I asked.

Benny chewed his cereal and swallowed: "You afraid of snakes?"

"I don't suppose any more than the next fella."

Now Merle put his fork down too.

"Oscar has been with us for the past six years," Benny continued, "and hasn't done no one any harm. If you just watch your step when you go out to pee in the night you'll be

fine. He takes care of the ground squirrel population in that wire pile. Ol' Oscar keeps their numbers down."

"Is he a bull snake?" I asked.

"Nope."

"What is he then?"

"Western diamondback—'bout six maybe seven feet long."

I put my fork down. "A SEVEN FOOT RATTLESNAKE?"

Merle took over. "Well, hold on. He ain't bothered nobody, and like I said, he's got a good thing going with them ground squirrels."

I swallowed some air. "That shed snake skin hanging over the Farrah Fawcet poster above my bed, that come off him?" I asked. It was as big around as my leg and nearly as long as the wall was wide.

Merle sat back in his chair. "Well, now, if it's a problem, I'd rather have you give up your claim to that place and let someone else have it that don't mind as much. I'd hate to see a problem with Oscar, since he ain't bothered no one at all."

There was silence around the table. As I looked around I had a feeling that any of the four other guys was ready and willing to make the swap. They slept on old army cots together in the cramped end of the former tack shed.

I asked Denise for more coffee and kept my mouth shut.

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During the off-season Shirley had gotten the idea to invite a group of Brownie Scouts from the elementary school district in Bishop to go for a half-day horseback ride and picnic. It would have made sense to do this after things had settled down a little, but no, Shirley thought, Merle and Benny and the boys needed some impetus, some deadline early on to get the place looking ship shape.

That morning, not long after our discussion regarding Oscar and my lodgings, the five of us stood outside the corral and watched as one of our best dude horses did a clumsy but successful somersault over the water trough, coming down hard on her back and, for a moment or two, not moving. The big white horse had been looking backwards as she ran.

With a look of surprised accomplishment, the little mule that had been chasing her slid to a stop and took a drink. Danny passed around a can of Copenhagen, and while we waited to see if she would get up on her own, Benny did a quick mental recount of how many head of horses we'd need for the Scouts.

Things must have been just a little tight, because he got a sudden worried look on his face and went over to the corral fence and looked over at Snowball.

"Come on honey, start breathin' please. Come on baby."

Then he picked up a handful of pebbles and after the third one bounced off her belly she lifted her head, blinked a few times, and put her head back down.

"Come on baby. Come on honey."

Finally Danny had had enough. Yelling, "I don't have time for this shit," he climbed over and shoved his way through the horses and reached down and pinched off Snowball's nostrils. Nothing happened at first; then the big white horse seemed to do a slow motion reverse of what she did to get there, completely clearing the water trough a second time, this time landing on her feet with Danny still holding on. It was a thing of beauty, and a little trick of advanced horsemanship I determined to remember.

With his look of worry gone, Benny directed us to catch up thirteen of our gentlest horses and get them saddled and ready. After an hour of gentle persuasion and threats and bruised ribs, we had a ragged line of these big gentle horses in nice big adult saddles all ready to go.

For a week and a half we had made an effort to fatten up the horses and mules by feeding them as much as possible, shy of causing them to founder. Having just come off some rather barren rangeland, they had been awful bony looking when they had arrived. But by the time the Scouts showed up, although their withers were still poking up like knife blades and their eyes were still sunken, they had bellies on them you could hardly get a cinch around.

We had no more gotten those cinches tightened, than a school bus pulled into the pack station, opened its doors, and out poured thirteen car-sick and frightened little girls in tiny brown skirts and berets. Not one of them was over three feet tall or over fifty pounds. Benny asked Merle if he'd known they were going to be so little, and Merle said what are we going to do now, send them home crying 'cause they didn't get to ride?

Benny said "Jesus, this is gonna be something!" and headed over with Shirley to shake hands with the Scout leader.

Miss Parkington, who also wore a Scout uniform complete with patch covered sash, looked the sickest of them all. Once out the door, she stood with her hand against the side of the bus steadying herself as if she were standing for the first time on a surfboard.

Over at the hitching rail, first one, and then moments later a second and then a third big mare squatted and began to pee. The little girls froze, aghast at the sheer volume of urine flooding the ground. Within seconds, the overwhelming sour smell, carried through the hot air, sent Miss Parkington with the girls at her heels running for the patch of aspens on the other side of the bus. Shirley and Benny, having made it only halfway across the yard, now stopped and listened to the sound of the Scouts' vomiting. Inside the bus, the driver grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

The plan had been for the Brownies to eat lunch upon their arrival, but they decided instead to take a walk to the creek to look for frogs and then go for their horseback ride before gathering in the cookhouse to eat. Denise gathered their lunchboxes and thermos bottles in a laundry basket and took them inside to keep them cool. Before long before the little girls began to drift over one by one to pet the horses at the hitching rail, and soon we were under way.

Paul and I had been assigned the job of leading the ride, and with Denise's help we each untied a horse, checked its cinch, and lifted a little girl up into the saddle. Our first problem was obvious—with the stirrups raised as high as they would go they were still seven or eight inches too long for even the tallest Scout. So we improvised by carefully inserting each child's foot into the loop of stirrup leather above each stirrup. This kept each little leg from dangling, but was a set-up for certain disaster if one of the children happened to slip off, as they would end up hanging like a bull-rider who couldn't get his

hand untied—except it would be a foot rather than a hand, which was even worse, because it would be the child’s head and not its feet that would end up whizzing past the rocks if the horse decided to run for home.

I looked at Paul. Paul looked at Denise. Denise looked into the small crowd of eager riders yet to be horsed, and finally Paul whispered, “Screw it. We have no choice. Let’s keep our fingers crossed.”

Merle and Benny walked over from where they had been talking with Miss Parkington, and both were beaming like something good had just happened. Paul lifted up another Scout and said, “What’re you two all smiles about?”

In a low voice, Merle explained how he’d been on the bad side of the local Sheriff for the past eleven years, since he had accidentally left the road in his pickup truck, gone through a fence and a pasture, and killed one of the Sheriff’s favorite horses one night on his way home from The Bit and Spur. He said there had been bad blood ever since, but now, he’d been told, one of the Scouts was the Sheriff’s granddaughter. Not only that, but the Sheriff himself had said okay to the child spending the day, deciding at long last to let bygones be bygones. Merle hooked his fingers in his belt loops and looked like he’d just won a lottery.

“You know,” he said, “this’ll be good for business. Sheriff Clayton is good friends with every horseman in the county—hell, this whole part of the state.”

“Which one is she?” I asked, looking down the line of tots.

“Beats me. Just make sure it’s smooth sailing or we’re all looking for a new line of work.”

Thinking back, and remembering Merle's penchant for overcoming adversity as a way of life, I wonder now if he had really wanted that feud to end after all.

Miraculously, we got the Scouts lined out and heading up the trail. Taking Miss Parkington's place in the line-up, Denise mounted the last horse and volunteered to take up the rear. Paul led and I took up a position in the middle.

About two miles west of the pack station, up a long series of switchbacks that cross over several scree slopes, a pretty little lake lies nestled in an east-facing cirque basin. Unless we followed the side of the highway leading to June Lake, the only other trail leading out was the one I had taken with Howard Fry a few days earlier. This being out of the question, Paul pointed his horse toward the lake and off we went.

Things started out smoothly. We stopped every fifty yards or so and consoled one or another of the Scouts as they began crying, but soon we had them all settled in and happy, with just a low, overall chorus of sobs and whimpering that seemed to pacify the horses. Which was a good thing, because by then each of the girls had dropped her reins and rode with a death grip on the saddle horn. The three of us each tried unsuccessfully to point out features of the landscape in the distance. Denise tried to get the girls to sing a campfire song, and ran through the three or four that she knew solo with no response from the girls around her. Shirley's ride was looking more and more like a bad idea.

A mile and a half away, in the shade of the big cottonwood outside the cookhouse, Merle, Shirley, Benny, Danny and Miss Parkington sat watching the procession from below. According to the bus driver, Benny brought out an old pair of binoculars that they handed back and forth while they enjoyed the quiet of the warm afternoon. Miss

Parkington felt better. In fact she had begun to take a stab at her peanut butter and jelly sandwich when Benny said calmly, "Holy Mother of God!"

In unison they all stood and squinted up at the mountain, even Shirley. Benny reached out the binoculars to Merle, who at first acted like he didn't want them.

Far off in the distance, appearing just over the crest of the ridge at the top of the upper most switchback, all sixteen horses headed down the mountain at a dead run. Like Benny, when Merle brought the scene into focus he could only make out Paul, Denise and me mounted on the last three horses, clinging on for dear life. He later said that it was hard to tell if the other horses even had riders, and it wasn't until the dust cloud made it halfway back to camp that he could see that the tiny girls and their saddles had begun to slip off to the horses' sides.

The best we could figure upon recollection was further confirmed by the sheer volume of horse manure that covered the trail unabated from the pack station to the top of the ridge. As each cinch loosened, several saddles swapped sides back to belly with a Scout firmly fastened in place and hanging down like a cow bell. It had all happened too fast for either Paul or Denise or me to react without spooking the horses, which one did anyway, nearly overrunning Denise, who was in the rear. Then all took off and the race was on.

You look back sometimes in life and know for certain there is a God, and by God this was one of those times. To this day, I'm sure none of us can understand how each and every one of those kids made it back unharmed, but they did.

All of the Scouts and Miss Parkington left that afternoon—pale and shaken and promising never to ride a horse again—on that big yellow bus they had ridden from Bishop. That is, all but one.

Sheriff Clayton insisted over the phone that no one leave until he came to pick up his granddaughter. After putting on her seat belt, the Sheriff walked back around his pickup and got in without saying a word to either Shirley or Merle. But when he closed his door, it made a bang like a high-powered rifle going off in a small room. As the sound echoed down the canyon, I'm sure folks heard it all the way to Bishop.

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Following the fiasco of our half-day with the Brownie Scouts, Merle withdrew to his cabin and gave orders through his wife Shirley. Over the next several days, a semi load of alfalfa hay arrived that we unloaded and then restacked inside a pole barn. A succession of local horse owners dropped by to have me shoe their horses and trim their Shetland ponies. And Danny and Paul went out on the first overnight pack trip of the season to deliver food and supplies to a trail crew in the Yosemite backcountry. But as day broke Friday morning, four days after the Sheriff roared out of the driveway with his granddaughter, Merle appeared and, crouching among us in the dirt outside the corral, picked up a stick and drew a map of the long canyon that began across the road.

Our job, he said, would be to gather the six head of horses and mules that had run off during our first week of beautification and shoeing. After crossing the road and slipping through the high willow banks along the nearby creek, they disappeared one by one into the aspen and grass swampland at the bottom of the long canyon that ran eastward from the pack station. Knee-deep to a horse in standing water, it was land through which it was almost impossible to travel—a veritable jungle of hidden sloughs and house-high trees and brush.

The way he figured it, our best chance would be to string three strands of barbed wire from whatever trees and posts and rock piles we could line up across the narrow-most point along the canyon floor—the idea being to fashion some sort of boundary against which we could herd and hopefully corral the pack stock. Danny was the first to stand and say it couldn't be done.

“Merle, if this is going to happen, we’re going to need a boat, if for no other reason than to transport the fence stretchers and metal posts and rolls of wire.”

Paul and Benny joined in, neither man seeing how a handful of guys on foot could string a fence through what was in places a shallow lake. But Merle had made up his mind. “I’m not writin’ them off as a loss,” he said. “We’re going to need that six head of stock, and soon. You guys are just going to have to get in there and get ‘er done.” It was the same speech we had all heard before.

Like Danny said, a boat would have made the job easier. Wading at times waist deep through water that had only recently been snow, for the next two days we carried all that we needed in our arms. Before us, the runaway horses and mules slipped from view with the effortless aquatic agility of moose. It became, simply, the worst job I have ever had.

Barbed wire, I quickly learned, is not inanimate. Once the clip holding the free end of the roll is pried loose, the wire becomes a living thing; a baleful and willful adversary I never knew existed until I began ranch work.

In spite of our best efforts to keep the wire under control, as we attempted to pull the wire tight it often pulled free and whipped through the air in whatever direction a person happened to be standing. Bleeding from cuts that made us look like we had each received a biblical scourging, we staggered through the water and mud, our clothes eventually in shreds. Not having the luxury of hip waders, our boots soon lost their stitching and glue and began to come apart. Gloves became reservoirs of water, dropped tools disappeared, while in the distance the fugitive horses and mules continued to watch us as they chewed the long marsh grass.

When we finished in the dark at the end of that second day, Merle was waiting for us in his pickup above the canyon rim. We loaded our tools into the back and climbed in, too tired to speak. But when we got to the pack station he told us to change our clothes and get back into the truck. Maybe he felt sorry for us, or felt guilty, or both, it's hard to say. Anyway, he wanted to buy us a drink, and twenty minutes later we were out on the loop road heading for June Lake.

When we entered the bar several people were dancing and some guy at a table in the center of the room was telling a joke. The room was filled with laughter and bright lights and the movement of the dancers, but when the door closed behind us everything came to a stop.

"Jesus Christ, Merle," the joke teller asked. "What did you do to these guys?"

Merle waved off the question and took his usual place at the dark end of the bar by the men's room. Within a minute or two his glass of bourbon on the rocks sank to half-empty in one thirsty swallow. Knowing Merle, the bartender topped off his glass. Smiling, Merle leaned over and sipped off the top in order not to spill.

There were four of us in the crew who had worked on the fence. Turning our faces from the crowd, we walked over and sat at the bar where the bartender drew each one of us a beer. Deer and fish mounts stared down from the walls through the smoke. I took a drink from my glass and looked into the mirror behind the bar. A worn out kid with a deep red scratch across his forehead stared back from among the bottles, someone younger and weaker and less sure of himself than I'd remembered. Merle turned to face the room and rested his elbows on the bar. Behind him his glass was empty. With a

blank look in his eyes, he grinned as the bourbon hit. Exhausted, I took another sip from my glass.

Merle started to swing his finger, silently conducting music only he could hear. Then he began to sing his favorite redneck anthem. As his voice grew louder a Greyhound bus pulled from the curb outside in a roar of diesel smoke and dust. One by one the bar patrons joined in for the chorus:

*“I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee,
a place where even squares can have a ball.
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse,
and white lightning’s still the biggest thrill of all.”*

While that last line was being shouted by most everyone in the room, I looked over my shoulder and Ruth, my girlfriend from San Francisco, appeared in the open doorway. As she squinted into the light, Paul turned and whispered softly. “What the hell is that?”

Ruth’s saffron Rajneeshpurnam robe seemed to glow. Barefoot, she took a tentative step forward. The room grew quiet. Still holding the door, she asked if she could use the telephone. Then she saw me at the bar.

“Bob? Honey? Is that you?”

I turned and took a step toward her, but before I could say a word my boot sole folded back and I fell, the barstool falling down onto my back.

The barroom erupted into applause.

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That night the sky cleared and the temperature dropped into the twenties. Ruth and I shared a sleeping bag that we placed beneath the blankets on my bed. I made love badly. I was too sore to move, and everywhere she touched me was a wire cut that had not yet begun to heal. Afterward, she lay with her head on my chest and I fell asleep listening to the wind outside blowing through the aspens along the creek.

Around four-thirty the following morning someone knocked on my door. After pulling on my pants and boots in the dark and kissing Ruth goodbye, I slipped over to the cookhouse. Following a quick breakfast, we each saddled a horse under the big light that hung above the barn, then lined out on the trail toward the canyon in single file. There were seven of us—Danny, Paul, Benny, and Randy, Steve and Peter from Shatzs' Bakery, and myself. My gloves, wet from two days submerged in water, had frozen during the night, so like everyone else I rode with bare hands, and took turns putting one hand and then the other under my armpits for warmth.

Breathing small white puffs of condensed air, the horses walked stiff-legged and hunched beneath their saddles. Danny rode up front, giving free rein to his big sorrel mare, Angel. Like most good mountain horses, she could follow a trail through the forest in the dark. Soon I heard her hooves and then the hooves of the other horses thump in slow succession over the wooden footbridge that crossed Rush creek. Once across, we stopped and dismounted in a clearing, tightened our cinches, and stamped the blood back into our legs and feet.

We were now about a mile and a half above the barbed wire fence we had strung across the floor of the canyon and flagged with ribbons of orange surveyor's tape in the hope that the horses and mules would see the fence line when they ran. Before us the land was still shrouded in darkness, but as we watched the sky slowly lose its stars, the big Jeffrey pines and Douglas firs began to fringe the eastern horizon.

Little by little, the first hint of fiery alpenglow high along the tips of the upper-most granite ridges and peaks colored the frost on the grass and the ice along Rush Creek. By then my saddle had warmed, but my hands were still numb and useless. I looked down at the catch rope coiled over my saddle horn, wondering if I was going to be able to throw a loop, or if the frozen rope would be limber enough to uncoil.

From the small clearing near the bridge, the forest opened up and we spread out across the grass and rode down canyon abreast about fifty yards apart, walking slowly to keep from spooking the runaway horses and mules into a run. Up ahead we began to see the vague shapes of animals moving through the trees, while behind us far in the distance the headlights of Merle's truck appeared on the dry south rim of the canyon, heading in our direction. Our patience seemed to be paying off, as one by one the runaway mules slowly came together and gathered in a loosely organized group that seemed resigned to being caught up and hauled back to the pack station.

Just before the fence we tightened our line, herding the group of runaways left into a dark steep-walled draw choked with aspens, sagebrush, and deer trails that wound among large, freestanding granite boulders. Behind us, Merle's truck rattled closer, his headlights moving up and down on the rocks overhead as he bumped down the road in our direction.

Here we began to uncoil our ropes, each of us picking one of the runaways to catch, but as we drew closer our horses began to get nervous. Suddenly short-necked and skittish, sidestepping with their heads up and ears cocked forward, our horses backed and reared as the smell of crushed sage filled the air. Paul's appaloosa turned for the canyon bottom and bolted, and as he tried to stop her he pulled her head around almost to his knee. When she slowed, he slid from his saddle and she dragged him by the reins, his boot heels digging into the ground.

I picked one of the mules and got ready to throw a loop when suddenly a dozen mule deer exploded from among the runaways. Bolting past us, they cleared the fence in one arcing, graceful leap. The mules, following close behind, had just begun to run abreast of one another when they crashed into the wire, stumbled, and took off as a pack toward the town of June Lake. In their wake, fifty yards of fence had simply disappeared.

Eventually, Merle's pack animals were caught up while they fed on the grass and flowerbeds in people's yards and returned to the pack station by the local townspeople. When the guys arrived back at the pack station that morning, they put their horses away and hung up their saddles and tack in the barn in silence, suffering from utter defeat. Alone in his cabin, Merle had long since parked the truck and started to work on his first tall cup of Old Sunny Brook.

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On my way back that morning, I stopped at a fork in the trail and waited while the others went on without me. When the dust settled, and the creak of their saddles had faded away through the forest, I reined my horse off toward the north around the backside of Silver Lake, to where the view of the mountains was more spectacular and the footing less rocky.

Along the shore, the afternoon sunlight beyond the wind-bent reeds reflected off the water in sparkles too bright to look at. But with the wind also came the unmistakable smell of trout. And so with Ruth still away in Mammoth shopping for groceries, and while the others played cards among themselves or read old magazines, I put away my horse and saddle and made my escape on foot with a fishing pole and a sack of basic casting tackle

Back across the highway, at the narrow outlet of the lake, the clear cold water flowing over the mossy rocks looked deceptively slow. As I took off my pants and boots and waded in, dropping deeper with each step, fingerling trout darted for the shadows along the banks.

On the opposite bank a trail led along the shoreline to a rocky point that protruded out into the deep water. There I unrolled my old, four-piece backpacker's rod from a cheesecloth, and after rolling each ferrule along the side of my nose to lightly oil the oxidized metal, I pushed each section together and ran my line down the narrowing series of eyes to the rod's tip and tied on a lure.

It was then that the combination of the view and the smell in the air reminded me of when I was a boy, and had once spent a few afternoons fishing with Norman Clyde, the legendary recluse of the High Sierra.

I couldn't have been much older than nine or ten the summer we met at a Sierra Club High Camp located somewhere in the King's Canyon backcountry. Norman was then at the tail end of a long life spent almost entirely alone in the Sierra. All I knew at the time was that he was a stout and smelly old man who nevertheless did not mind if a few of us kids tagged along with him to the edge of a lake to watch him fish. Although many years had gone by, I still recalled some of the lessons he taught, not the least of which was the moral freedom to use a spinning set-up when the fish weren't hitting surface flies, and cruised instead far below the surface in the deep water.

As I began casting out into the dark water of the lake, I thought about how Norman had spent close to fifty years alone, doing what I was doing now when he wasn't climbing mountains. Fifty years with the same fresh smell coming down from the high granite crags and snowfields, the same feeling of wind burning his face and the backs of his hands, but farther, much farther away from the highways and roads and trails, with no one to talk to.

And I suppose that was how he liked it. The year he entered the Sierra for the first time, 1914, was ironically within a few months of when John Muir lay dying on a hospital bed in Los Angeles. From Tuolumne Meadows, just north of Yosemite, Norman began crossing the Sierra on foot, meeting up somewhere along the way with a packer named Charlie Robinson. Together, with a string of fourteen mules, they traversed the

backcountry that lay just to the south and west of where I now stood casting a lure out into a lake.

Continuing on to the Owens Valley, Norman had traveled southward alone and on foot to Lone Pine, where he took off straight up the eastern escarpment of the Sierra crest to the summit of Mount Whitney, and beyond. It was to be a landmark excursion, for from that time onward, although a burro or mule would have been at the very least a source of companionship, he shied away from ever using pack animals, relying instead on his own two feet to carry a pack that often weighed over one-hundred pounds.

By the time I saw him sometime during the early 1960s, he was no longer seeking out the highest and most difficult peaks to climb, though by then he had made more first ascents than anyone, more even than John Muir, Clarence King and William Brewer combined. What hadn't changed was that around us kids Norman remained the teacher he had once been early in his life, before he became disillusioned with the behavior of both students and mankind in general, and left the lowlands for good.

As I stood there on that outcropping of rock, casting into the sun, yearning for the sudden pull on the end of my line, I found it hard not to think about him out there all those years fishing for his food, about his big hands with their black, campfire-darkened nails working the hooks from the mouths of trout. How many fish he must have cleaned and cooked and eaten!

Oftentimes, when I walked the streets of San Francisco with Ruth, I wondered about his life away from everyone and most everything the rest of us rely on to make it from day to day, how it must have been to live with only himself and the wilderness to contend with, with only the sun and the stars above and the great weather with its storms and

flashes of lightening and crashing, ear-splitting thunder. Casting my lure, I looked about at the high cliff faces, wondering what it meant to be a recluse without the mantle of creed or philosophy, apart from whatever solace he gained from his worn Portuguese translation of the New Testament; to simply find things to do alone each day—to cook, to read, to repair, to sew, to ponder, to photograph, to make note of in a barely legible journal bound with a thin leather strap while waiting for the sun to go from the east to west, for the passes to clear early in the summer, and for winter to arrive just as suddenly and close the door. In those scribbled notes, not dwelling on the beauty or danger or heroism or feelings of sorrow or loneliness or elation—the things perhaps we want to see in a man in order to make a connection—I'm left wondering how it must have felt to encounter for a lifetime these lakes and streams and animals and birds and reptiles and insects and storms. Or, especially, how he felt when he was lying alone on the ground in the dark and no one knew where he was or, dare it be said, even cared. What was it like to be a truly elemental man, wanting to be left alone in the wilderness?

Married but three years to a nurse named Winnie who died of tuberculosis on of all days, Valentines Day, Norman remained alone for forty-one years, celibate, at times hungry and wet and cold, witnessing things spectacular and majestic, a master of six foreign languages, but speaking to no one. Possessing, in his silence, a certain prowess, emotionally independent, self-confident, self-reliant, self-righteous—that perhaps explains the military hat and the austere soldier's attire he wore, marching onward up the trails conquering unclimbed peaks, surmounting obstacles, facing down silence. Look at my prowess, he seemed to say, turning his back on everyone after she died, it negates my feelings, my weakness, my need to speak, my need to have someone—that notion of

“join with us and we will survive,” that we will break bread together and be made whole, that old eucharistic promise of a basket of several loaves and fish becoming thousands. How many fish had he eaten, augmented by offerings from people on their way out of the backcountry blessing him with their leftovers? Joining packers by their campfires, appearing out of the shadows, bear like, humbly accepting plates full of beans and biscuits and canned fruit and jellies and cheese and salami and fish—what was that level of isolation like, I wondered?

After ten minutes of casting, I changed lures to a heavy Red Devil that went even further and deeper, singing off my line and landing among the tiny whitecaps with a satisfying *plop*. That afternoon, thinking of Norman, there was a simple pleasure in casting when one was not faced with the need to catch fish to survive. Surely, amid the sounds and smells of the mountains, so very far from the smells and noise of the city, there had been, for him at least, that thorny issue of needing and wanting something that neither money nor personal status could buy.

An impatient man with people, Norman taught patience when fishing—laying off the water during mid-day, stretching out beneath a tree to watch the clouds above the peaks and their shadows race across the mountains, across the waters. For him, like Howard Fry, patience was the key to just about everything, although I knew no more about it at twenty five than I did at the age of ten.

When the first of three large trout struck that afternoon, I was jolted out of my wondering with the excitement of a child. That same primal euphoria at being successful, especially after a day of such failure, gave sudden value to what just moments before had been simply rocks and sky and water. I knew then what it must have meant for Norman

to fish, that over and over again it was perhaps a validation of not only his independence, but also his sense of self-worth, a feeling he had rarely gotten from the world of men and work and marriage. I only wonder if in the end it was worth it.

Back at the pack station later that afternoon, the three women had still not returned from their grocery shopping trip to Mammoth Lakes. I rinsed my trout and wrapped them in foil and placed them in the cookhouse refrigerator and then fell asleep while reading alone in my plywood shed.

Dreaming, I looked up from a table loaded with dirty dishes and glasses and utensils to the door of the kitchen in Ruth's apartment. At the stove, she was stirring something sweet in a saucepan. In spite of the kitchen's dim light and her cooking apron, I saw that she was pregnant. A man stood behind her and, placing his arms around her, pulled her hair to one side and kissed her neck. She lay down her spoon and turned and, as best they could, they embraced. A child I did not know stood in the doorway and began staring at me. Inside Ruth's apartment, it was warm and quiet and the couple in the kitchen broke from their embrace and kissed and she turned back to the saucepan on the stove, and when the man appeared in the doorway beside the child I could see that he was a stranger, that he was older than me and very happy. On the dinning room table were various loaves of home-baked bread and salads and a rice and curry dish on a large white serving platter, and the air was strong with the smell of curry.

I woke up and looked across my room at the snakeskin on the wall. Cleo wagged her tail against the floor. Now early in the evening, the latch on my door lifted and Ruth

entered with a wicked smile. She smelled like curry and patchouli oil. “Shirley and Denise asked me to cook dinner,” she grinned.

Pulling her down to the bed, I laughed. “Do they sell tofu in Mammoth Lakes?”

“I love you,” she said, evading the question.

The thought of her and Merle together in the same county swung me from terror to laughter and back again. “Has Merle been around?” I asked, sitting up.

She took my hands, interlacing our fingers. Her hair went down over the edge of the bed, almost to the floor. As we kissed I could swear that Cleo was smiling.

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When I entered the cookhouse the table had already been set. Two empty Coke cans without tops served as vases for foot-high bunches of juniper and sage. The lights had been turned off and three lit candles were positioned down the center of the table. Merle sat in the corner, his hand clutching his plastic Coke cup. He stared straight ahead, hypnotized by the candles. The rest of the guys, as well as the extra hands who had helped us in the morning, took chairs on either side of the table.

When Ruth crossed the room, everyone's eyes followed her to the kitchen. It was as if they had not seen a real hippie outside of pictures and they wondered what she was going to do next—suddenly shed her robe and walk around the room naked or begin smoking pot? Merle and the guys were clearly ready for anything.

Denise appeared in the kitchen doorway, a lit cigarette clenched in her teeth, and handed Ruth two large bowls of brown rice. After placing them on the table, Ruth brought out a tray with eight tiny teacups and placed one before each of the men at the table except for Benny. When she looked over at Merle, he tipped back his cowboy hat and the pale top-half of his forehead shone in the darkness.

“That’s okay. I’m good,” he said, waving his hand. “You folks go ahead and get started.”

Danny moved the teacup away from his plate toward the center of the table. Ruth came from the kitchen with a teapot and moved his cup back beside his plate and poured some of the contents of the teapot into his cup. He looked at the cup, frowning.

“I’m sorry ma’am, I don’t like tea.”

“Taste it,” she said, pouring into the next cup on the table.

Reluctantly, Danny reached out and took a sip. His forehead wrinkled, and staring back into the cup he took another swallow. “Goddamn! That’s good. What the hell is it? It’s hot!”

Ruth smiled as she continued to fill the cups. “Sake.”

At this point, Merle struggled up out of his chair and crossed the room. “Well, I’ll just have to give this a try,” he said, pulling out his chair and sitting down at the head of the table. Ruth filled his cup and put her hand on his shoulder as he took a drink.

Merle smacked his lips and held up his cup for a refill. “You know, little lady, you just might be all right to have around.”

Merle’s wife Shirley, crocheting beside a small lamp in the corner, looked up and sighed. “Merle Edwards,” she said. “I wish I had a camera.”

While Ruth went around the table one more time refilling the cups, I helped myself to some of the brown rice and passed the bowl to Benny. Denise then brought out a large wooden bowl containing the first fresh mix of salad greens and purple onion and artichoke hearts and bell pepper slices and croutons any of us had seen in nearly a month. The guys loaded the salad onto their plates with little room left for anything else.

The first course was the chicken curry I first smelled in my sleep. It was not the sort of thing I would have thought these ranch-bred boys would have touched if their lives depended upon it, but the sake was now flowing faster than Ruth and Denise could heat the bottles and refill the teapot, and, besides, this was something other than ground beef and potatoes, and after the chase earlier in the day, we were all hungry enough to eat shoe leather.

As each successive entree' was cleaned up, the guys acted as if it had been the first food they'd seen in a week: Chicken curry; shitake mushrooms in a teriyaki sauce with shrimp, tofu, and shaved ginger; and then, as a final course, two large platters of vegetable and shrimp tempura.

After his fifth cup of sake, Merle was reloading his plate and beaming proudly at Ruth. He pressed both hands against his belly and belched. "Room for more," he said, grabbing his fork. I grabbed several more shrimp and a battered slice of sweet potato from one of the platters on the table and continued eating.

Denise stood in the kitchen doorway, smiling at Ruth and shaking her head. As a final course, the two women brought out a tray of coffee cups filled with green tea ice cream. Six bottles of sake were now empty and the guys at the table each sat in silent rapture as they drunkenly focused on their dessert, the clinking of their spoons the only sound in the dimly-lit room.

In spite of their differences, during the day Ruth and Denise had become friends. Looking back, I realize now that any feelings of rivalry never became an issue. My initial apprehension at having Ruth around the people at the pack station, in particular people like Merle and Benny, had been unfounded. Within a day or two of her unexpected appearance, Ruth's quiet self-assurance carried her further through any unusual and potentially uncomfortable social situations than my tendency to remain withdrawn and distant ever had. At first, I thought her ready acceptance with the guys had been a reaction to her good looks. But I soon saw that she had won over the women too—not only Denise and Shirley, but the women from town who brought me their

horses to shoe. The underlying tension among us guys that marked the first two weeks of the season disappeared in the face of Ruth's easy-going and non-judgmental attitude. And she, more than anyone or anything else, seemed to lessen the reservoir of anger that simmered just below Merle's smiling, country-boy demeanor. Several days later he borrowed a saddle from someone in town for Ruth to use, and then stood at the corral rail with his wife and clapped as she rode a horse for the first time. He began to call her "My Little Hippie," beaming with a kind of fatherly pride as she rough-housed with the dogs or jumped up and rode me piggy-back to my shed. But at the time of this supper, as I watched her come and go with the food and the sake, I was as unsure of how she would fit in as I had been while in San Francisco six months earlier, perhaps even more so. That night, because of the dream I'd had, I also began to think about her for the first time as a mother and a wife. About that I was even more unsure. The idea of a simple life in the mountains was suddenly becoming more difficult to imagine.

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Over the next several days, the horses and mules we had lost and failed to capture began to arrive in the trailers of the townspeople. Since they had been the craftiest in their ability to escape, they also proved to be the hardest to shoe, especially now that they had been wild again for an additional two weeks. The water they had been standing in had overly softened their hooves, and when they had run off into the dry ground around June Lake, those softened hooves began to tear and split and break off and come apart.

By the time I saw them at the pack station I had almost nothing to work with, or nail a shoe onto. So I fired up my forge and began to pull clips.

It takes some practice, but when a shoe is heated in a forge fire to a bright yellow heat, and the edge of the shoe is held against the edge of the anvil's top surface, a thin wafer of metal can be drawn out from the edge of the shoe using the shaping hammer. Typically, one clip is drawn from the toe or front of the shoe, or other clips can be drawn one from each side, so that there can be as many as three clips sticking up from the horseshoe. After the shoe is nailed on, these thin clips are then tapped back against the hoof wall with the shoer's nailing hammer. These act as additional insurance to help whatever nails are driven to hold on the shoe. I now began drawing three clip shoes for these last horses and mules that had come from their week in the watery ground in the canyon.

One problem I often had was the reaction of the livestock to the sound of the coal forge. A small electric blower, attached to the bottom of the firebox, supplies the blast of oxygen rich air to the burning coal, which creates a roaring sound and a column of smoke and ash.

I soon discovered that with Ruth holding the lead rope, the mules became as docile as any of our kids' horses. She had borrowed a pair of shoes and some more suitable clothes from Denise, and offered to help as I was trying to trim a big gray mule that kept setting back on its lead rope at the hitching rail whenever I attempted to pick up its feet. Ruth untied the mule and walked it in a circle around the area I was working in, and I watched as its head lowered until its muzzle was in her hand and its ears were as low as Ruth's chest.

Avoiding eye contact, I slowly walked up and finished trimming the mule's feet. Then, after shaping its shoes, I came back this time with my shoeing box and lifted a foot and began nailing, and while Ruth continued to talk to the mule, I nailed on and clinched off the rest of the shoes. When I gathered up my tools, and walked back to the forge, she led the mule over to the corral and put it up with the others.

Returning with a big white gelding with horribly slit hooves, Ruth tried the same approach as she had with the gray mule. While Danny and Benny and Merle watched from beneath the big cottonwood tree, the big horse pulled back and reared twice as Ruth held onto the lead. On my third try at approaching the horse, I took my nippers and my rasp from the shoeing box and took off my leather apron and approached holding the tools behind my back. But once again, when I began to slide my hand down its leg to lift its hoof, the horse reared and dragged Ruth toward the corral.

Merle had seen enough. Easing himself from his chair and approaching the horse, he took the lead rope from Ruth and asked her to step aside. Before she had taken a step he rammed his knee up into the horse's ribcage. When the horse pulled back again, Merle again rammed his knee into its side, then grabbed one of its ears with both hands and pulled its head around to the side as the horse began to go down,

"I'll show you how to hold a goddamn horse," he yelled at its head. "You son-of-a-bitch!"

White-faced, Ruth backed away. After bringing his jerking knee into its ribs a third time, Merle shoved the horse's side against the corral and yelled for me to grab my tools.

“Don’t be pussy footing around with these bastards,” he yelled for everyone to hear. “Give ‘em a little slack and they’ll make you regret you ever saw a horse or a mule. You remember that. You hear?”

Off to the side, I saw Ruth heading for the cookhouse. When I entered the dining room an hour later the conversation between her and Denise stopped. The silent stare they gave me was as cold and distant as winter starlight. Apparently, I was now just one of the men who, like Merle, made the world a cruel place to live.

By the afternoon of the following day, I managed to finish shoeing the rest of the animals that had come out of the canyon. While I was under the last mule, the dogs got out and fought over the hoof trimmings. The mule, which had been standing quietly until the dogs rushed in, blew up and I caught a hoof in my side. After crawling out of the way, I sat on the ground trying to catch my breath and checking what I coughed up for blood.

I took a short walk around the yard and eased back under the mule and continued to trim its front hooves. Since it had been overlooked during the round up a year ago in the vast pastureland in the Owens Valley north of the town of Bishop, the mule’s hooves had folded over to where its hoof walls resembled thickened taco shells. With only a one-inch gap in the center of each hoof, there appeared to be no way to shape shoes to match its elongated, constricted feet.

It was times like these that I reminded myself that this was why I was here at the end of the road with sixty head of pack animals, working six and often seven days a week for

a flat salary of six hundred dollars a month. I was there to learn something about shoeing horses and mules, and not just the easy ones.

What had been implied by the old shoer who had suggested I come up here in the first place, and what I quickly found to be true, was that out on my own, picking up a horse or a pony to shoe or trim every couple days would never provide the kind of variety and experience I found at the pack station. The folded-over hoof I now held in my hand was not the kind of hoof I encountered often enough even when working later in life for the general public. Most backyard and stabled animals have been reasonably well cared for, are handled more often, and are around people throughout the year rather than only seasonally.

Since the hoof walls were still considerably wider apart at the hairline, I carefully whittled down each of the mules' feet, cutting away the sole and narrow frog until the soles began to give under thumb pressure. Soon the feet began to look more like normal hooves, but unfortunately, even though the mule stood on soft ground, it began to hold up one foot after another to ease obvious pain. Minutes later, after I hand forged shoes to match the feet and began to nail them on, the little mule jerked its feet with every tap of the hammer.

Benny came up to me when I clinched off the nails on the last foot, and together we stood looking down at what I had accomplished. "Looks great," he said. "By God I didn't think a guy could have done anything with those feet. You sure made a new mule out of her."

But as I pulled off my apron and turned for the tack shed to put away my tools I could see Benny pulling at her lead rope without success. The mule stood frozen, as if each foot were welded to the ground.

“Shit, oh baby,” Benny whispered. “This isn’t good.”

I came back over and together we pulled at the mule’s halter but she wouldn’t budge.

“This really isn’t good.” He repeated.

“No shit, Benny. I get the point. Listen, you pull, and I’ll push from behind.”

I placed a hand on either side of her tail and leaned into her, pushing as hard as I could while Benny continued to pull at her lead rope, but she remained anchored to the ground, too sore to move.

Merle reeled out of his cabin, his plastic Coke cup in his hand. Crossing the yard, he threw his cup off toward the chairs and said, “I’ll show you how to handle a damn obstinate mule. Here, let me have the lead rope.”

Benny held out his hand to stop him, but Merle pushed him aside and began pulling at the mule’s halter. Before he had a chance to punch a knee into its ribs, the pain in the mule’s feet had reached the point where it gathered its legs beneath its body and with a loud groan went down to the ground and lay with its legs out stiff as a corpse.

“Well I’ll be a son-of-a-bitch.” Merle laughed. “I’ve never seen a shoeing job end up in the death of a critter.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “Damn, now I’ve seen everything.”

Sometime during the night the crippled mule regained her feet, and in the morning Paul was able to help her limp back into the corral. The memory of her standing there

with her feet bunched and her head lowered like the horse in the famous end-of-the-trail painting remains to this day the most painful image among my occasional failures as a beginning horseshoer.

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Early the following morning an old pick up truck rattled into the yard and a tall, bearded man in dirty work clothes got out and talked to Merle. When the two of them headed for the barn, a couple of us followed and watched as the man climbed into the rafters and started searching through the old boxes and junk that had been stored overhead since the early days of the pack station.

After a short while, he yelled down that he had found what he was looking for and began handing down several old boxes of dynamite—so old in fact that each box had a thin white beard of nitroglycerine that seeped out through the cardboard and hung down for several inches. It was a situation that would have sent anyone with a knowledge of explosives running for his life.

Merle explained that the man had been awarded a contract by the Forestry Service to clear a large rockslide that had obliterated a section of the John Muir Trail. One way to cut expenses, the man figured, was to look into using the stash of old dynamite that was rumored to still exist in Merle's barn. Merle in turn told the man when he had called that he could have it for free if he could remove it without blowing up the pack station. To return the favor the man agreed to hire one of Merle's packers to transport the dynamite to the backcountry. And when the last of the five large boxes was stacked beneath the porch roof outside the barn, Merle came up to me and said, "Bob, how about you taking tomorrow off to take a little ride into the backcountry?"

The next morning, after haltering the three most gentle mules and Molly, our calmest lead horse, Merle and I carefully loaded the canvas panniers with the five boxes of dynamite as well as several boxes of food and tools. The bearded man shook my hand and, pausing strangely, looked into my eyes and said “good luck.” before striding off on foot toward the pass.

Ruth stood beside me at the hitching rail as I tied down the last load. She held my dog Cleo in her arms. “I don’t want to hear any loud noises coming from the mountains, okay?” she said, walking away.

As soon as I had my pack string lined out on the trail I looked back and saw her standing with Shirley and Denise in the big open yard outside the cookhouse, her saffron robe a tiny splotch of color in the distance.

My route into the backcountry that day was over the same trail, blasted out of hard rock, I had taken with Howard Fry to deliver sand and cement to the dam-building crew of college girls. If I was going to get killed somewhere along the way, it would most likely happen within that same mile-long stretch of trail where so many head of pack stock had slipped and fallen to their deaths in the past. But after dismounting and checking the balance of my loads where the aspens and the dirt trail ended and the slickrock began, I pushed on with my fingers crossed and made the pass without incident.

From there I led my string of mules around the south side of a small lake and then over another series of steep and rocky switchbacks into the comparatively more level and sparsely-forested backcountry of Yosemite National Park. At nearly ten thousand feet elevation, the conifers there were stunted and deformed by the heavy and longer-lasting snow pack of winter.

As I climbed higher, the land opened into a nearly treeless moonscape, dotted with tarns, whose edges of spongy tundra were covered with tiny purple and blue and yellow flowers. From among the nearby piles of granite boulders, home to both marmots and pika, I heard occasional barks and whistles as the small, golden-brown animals slipped from view. It was a place of wind and brilliant reflecting sunlight, which lit up and rippled the lakes and streams and scoured the already perfectly clear air.

I stopped and dismounted to eat lunch among the rocks beside a pool of water in which a half dozen leopard frogs were poised motionless just beneath the surface. As I unwrapped my sandwich, a low and distant roaring noise began to grow louder until seconds later two navy jets from the China Lake Naval reservation appeared high overhead like two tiny daytime stars against the clear blue sky. I watched as they played out a mock dogfight, one chasing the other until they disappeared over the southern horizon, the roar of their jet engines melting away into sound of the wind in the grass.

But as I began to eat my apple, the sound of the jets again grew louder and this time, one directly behind the other, they flew up higher and higher until they disappeared. Several seconds later, as their contrails reappeared streaking toward earth, they gained speed until there was suddenly a deafening sonic boom that echoed off into the distance, toward the pack station and the town of June Lake.

After first rechecking the balance of my pack loads, I pressed on and made it to the camp of the trail crew by two o'clock that afternoon. When I entered camp the bearded man who had found the dynamite in Merle's barn ran up to me.

“They called on the battery radio. They think you’re dead.” He said, running his fingers through his hair. “Boy, am I am glad to see you. No kidding, pal. There is some girl down there at the pack station who thinks you blew up. She had me convinced.”

Over at his camp was a large canvas wall tent in which they had a long table and piles of duffle bags and a row of cots and a folding metal stove. When he handed me the radio, the ranger in June Lake answered. I told her who I was and that I had arrived safely. Through the static I heard her say that they had not seen the jets from the valley, but the sonic boom had nearly broken the windows at the pack station.

“Your girlfriend borrowed someone’s boots and is walking up the trail.”

“Now?”

“Merle is following her on horseback,” answered the voice on the radio. “They should be to the pass by now.”

I looked around the tent not knowing what to say, trying to imagine what the world’s two most unlikely people looked like as they headed together up the trail.

“What did she expect to find if I had blown up?” I yelled back into the radio.

It crackled with static. “You.” She laughed. “She was repeating some Oriental prayer over and over as she went up the trail. She said it was the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*. I guess it worked.”

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Late that night, after Ruth came back from the shower house, I cut patches of moleskin to cover the blisters on her feet. We were both exhausted. Although she had never ridden a horse, Merle and I insisted that she ride Molly the nine miles from the camp back to the pack station. As a result she was not only saddle sore, but later on during the night, her legs were seized by cramps. Nothing she did got them to stop, until she got out of bed and began pacing from the dresser to the door while stamping her feet and shaking her legs. Only out of sheer exhaustion did she finally lie down and fall asleep. Altogether she and I each walked and rode eighteen miles that day.

On the way down Angel's Flight, one of the mules had caught and pulled off a shoe on one of the sharp rock edges along the trail. After breakfast the following morning Danny helped me catch him up and bring him out to the shoeing rail.

Zig Zag had a marijuana leaf and the number 13 branded on either side of his rump. One of the most branded mules in a corral full of overly-branded mules, he'd had a rough life. Among his previous owners had been a household of Fresno meth addicts who had used him to haul lab supplies, sleeping bags and shotguns into their camp in the Sierra foothills.

Like Freak Out, his response to more or less anything was to panic. First he'd stiffen and freeze, with his eyes growing bigger and bigger while staring straight ahead, then he'd bolt in whatever direction allowed the greatest possibility of escape.

When the shoe came off the previous day, it took a good-sized chunk of the hoof sidewall with it. Now, looking down at his foot, I could see that there wasn't much to

nail to, but the problem was that at a busy pack outfit the mule needed to be shod no matter what. One simply had to find a way to get a shoe back on and get the mule or horse back into service. And so I leveled the bottom of the foot the best I could and shaped a shoe to fit.

When I was ready to nail it on, Zig Zag sensed what I was about to do and dropped down into his spring-loaded stance like a runner getting set in the blocks. With the very first tap on the nail, he blew and set back on his lead rope, then somehow managed to get his leg through the thigh strap on my chaps. As he remained tied to the rail, he began to jump up and down in place with me attached.

It all went by in a slow motion blur, with the sky and the mountains alternating with the ground and the rocks, with the end result that at some point I ended up on the ground beneath the mule with three broken ribs.

At first I tried to tough it out. I got back in there and nailed on and clinched off the shoe, but after a while I began coughing and Ruth and Shirley thought maybe I'd punctured a lung. So around lunch time I was loaded into my pickup and Ruth drove me down to the hospital in Bishop.

While Ruth checked me in at the front desk of the emergency room, I was taken away by a nurse and helped into a gown. Then for the several hours I lay on a sheet-covered metal table and waited for the doctor. With no books or magazines to thumb through, Ruth and I stared at the floor and listened. At first we listened to a kid next door get stitched up by what had to be the world's most patient physician. It was hard to believe a child's screams could reach that pitch and volume and stay there without any more pause

than it took for the child to reload its lungs with air. The nurse came in several times and retook my vital signs and told me the doctor would be with me “in a moment.”

The emergency room was built in the form of a circle, with the nurses’ station in the middle and the curtained-off patient “rooms” arrayed along its circumference.

Everything everyone said in either the nurses’ station or in these rooms was amplified by the department’s configuration. Next door, to our left, was the young boy who had cut open his chin on the edge of a coffee table. To our right, in the ob/gyn room, a young woman suffering a miscarriage was weeping with her mother by her side. When her mother made an attempt to assuage her daughter’s grief by suggesting that, as a single woman on her own, she would be better off without the responsibility of a child, the young woman burst out crying and ordered her mother to leave. An openly hostile argument ensued in which neither the young woman or the mother seemed to be gaining the upper hand. Another child arrived with what appeared to be a raging ear infection, and was placed in the pediatric room. Now there were two children wailing in chorus from either side of the circle.

We continued to wait. Ruth tried to offer me an occasional, feeble smile. Clearly uneasy in such a place, her color had blanched since we arrived to the point where she looked sick. Since I was unable to find a comfortable position on the metal table, I sat in the chair with Ruth sitting crosswise in my lap. And we waited.

Another hour went by before the speakers in the ceiling crackled to life, calling out a “Trauma Code Alert.” Within seconds the ER began to fill with people from other parts of the hospital—lab techs, x-ray techs, respiratory therapists, the nursing supervisor, the

hospital chaplain. Suddenly an ambulance screamed into the parking lot and the whole department became a war zone.

Three twenty-year-olds from Los Angeles, on their way to Mammoth Mountain to go mountain biking, had been hit head-on a few miles south on highway 395. All three, from what we could hear through our curtain, were near death from their injuries. In three separate rooms nurses began to start IV lines, hang blood, cut off clothes, and shout at each other while the lone doctor moved from patient to patient. X-rays were being shot, wallets gone through for names, and hand-held police radios, belonging to the sudden rush of patrolmen and deputies, filled the room with overlapping radio traffic. Sometime during all of the excitement, a nurse stuck her head around the edge of my curtain and told us that it would be a while until the doctor would be available.

Within twenty minutes, first one and then the second of the young men was pronounced dead. Now the nurses and doctor focused their efforts on the lone survivor, and since all family members were at least as far away as Los Angeles, both the volume and the tempo of the department began to settle down.

Through it all Ruth sat with her head against my shoulder. In spite of her open-mindedness, or perhaps because of it, her world-view of peace, tranquility and harmony did not seem to readily assimilate the truly bad stuff that could happen in life. For her, there had to be a reason behind everything, some karmic orchestration that led inevitably toward good, and both the pack station and Bishop were now rapidly providing an unwelcome awakening from her world of poetry readings and yoga and endlessly requited love.

My x-rays later that afternoon showed three broken ribs but no collapsed lung. I was given a prescription for painkillers, told to take ibuprofen, and released as the sun went dropped down behind the mountains.

I could see that the scare, first with the sonic boom, then with my ribs, and finally the emergency room, was gnawing at Ruth. As we drove back up the long grade out of the valley, she bit at one of her fingernails and stared out her window.

“Don’t look so glum.” I told her. “It could have turned out a lot worse.”

She turned and stared at me with an angry look in her eyes. “This past two days has been ugly, Bob. I don’t know why you’re here, when you could get hurt for real next time. I don’t know why *I’m* here.”

After a few moments of silence, I told her what was obvious, that I had signed up for the summer, and that I couldn’t just quit over a couple of broken ribs.

“This is just nuts, Bob,” she continued, her voice rising even louder. “You run a decent chance of getting killed, and you know it. Either at the pack station or up there in those mountains. This is crazy. I don’t want to be here to see you get hurt again or die, Bob.”

We topped out on the summit of Sherwin Grade and the Minarets sprung into view above Mammoth. I felt the need to say something. “If that car wreck hadn’t come in while we were there at the ER, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Bullshit, Bob. That’s complete bullshit. You went through college so you wouldn’t have to lay your life on the line to make a paycheck. I don’t know what you’re thinking. Next time it’ll be a broken leg, or you’ll get kicked, or some spooky horse will buck you off into the rocks when no one’s around. What the hell are you doing out here, Bob?”

What are you trying to find? These people have nothing to offer you. This is total bullshit.”

I could tell it was no use arguing. For the next few minutes, I drove toward home, watching the mountain shadows fall across the lowland juniper forest to our right. This was the time of day when jack rabbits darted across the road and the chartreuse retinas of deer began to shine in pairs from the darkened clumps of trees along the highway. With one hand on the wheel, I opened the bottle of painkillers and washed down a few of the pills with what was left of my morning coffee.

Eventually, I explained to her again how I felt, as I had when I left the city. Because I knew I was loved as a kid, for better or worse I didn't worry about love or seek it out. Maybe that was not such a good thing now that I looked back on it. Companionship and love were things I took for granted. What I was hungry for instead were the backcountry experiences I'd had growing up, when I was frozen and baked in the thin high-altitude air, when I swam naked in lakes that had snow banks on their southern shores in August. It was in the mountains where I had vivid memories of the intoxicating smell of pine sap dripping from tree wounds in the heat of hot yellow afternoons, and the smell that came from where I shoved my hands under the hairy saddle pads of working, lathered horses or mules and felt the damp heat there that was as rich as a newly-opened can of snuff. In the mountains I had seen millions of stars above me as I lay on the ground before going to sleep, away from city lights, and trout with rainbow-colored sides and piggish callow bears, and raptors flying off with snakes in their talons. I had witnessed terrible storms from the semi-shelter of rock outcroppings, the blinding flash of lightening illuminating

for a fraction of a second millions of individual mercury raindrops held motionless in the black air, before the inevitable bang of nearby thunder; times when torrential rain poured from the sky and from rocks and hillsides and flooded the flat ground, pock-marking the surface of new-made lakes where dry earth had been. I remembered rainbows and sunrises and sunsets that were more colorful and beautiful and memorable because I was a child and everything was new and louder and brighter and colder and tasted better. The mountains were also where I learned about death, where I caught trout that were fantastically alive, and killed them, and ate them; where a mule with broken legs thrashed itself in a swollen river gorge until the pistol shot from a nearby bank ended its misery, and I stood watching the freezing roar of water pour over its hide, the same dark color as the rocks on which it lay dead. I recalled tremendous, exaggerated, uncontrolled things: extreme heat and cold, light and dark; and ridiculously high, towering walls of granite that caught morning's alpen glow, and, later, the deep orange of sunset. The mountains were where I was always hungry and always drinking in everything around me through my senses, a place where there had been an infinitesimally better life than I had ever experienced in the dull, peopled years since.

As I spoke, Ruth looked out the window at the wall of dark trees going by. In her eyes, in place of her anger was a profound look of pity and sadness I had never seen before. I'd gone off on a tangent about things that had nothing to do with being close to another human being. I was asking to be another Norman Clyde, when my Winnie was still alive and sitting beside me.

“This is probably as good a time as any to tell you I’ve been thinking of moving to Chicago.” She turned toward me and lay her head against the top of the seat. “I’ve an opportunity to study dance at the conservatory,”

“Where are you going to live?”

“I’ve been saving up, I’ve got money. This is something I need to do for me.” She reached out her hand and placed it on my thigh and looked up at the side of my face. “I love you,” she said. “I want you to remember that.”

I put my arm around her just as the pain pills began to kick in.

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I was sore as hell the following day. Ruth kept to herself in the morning and then spent the rest of the day with Denise. The two of them could be seen through the window of the cookhouse talking to each other with their arms crossed. Whatever it was they were saying, they obviously had a strong opinion on the subject, and I began to wonder if one or both of them would get in one of the pickups and simply leave and not come back.

As I watched her through the window, I knew that Ruth would never settle down and raise a family in Bishop or Lone Pine or Independence, places where the main attraction on a Friday night was a bag of chili-covered Fritos at the Woolworth's store or the parade of semi-drunk teenagers driving by in their pickup trucks. And I was just as certain that regardless of where I ended up, I was never going to move back to the city. And yet I also knew that I wasn't going to grow old at the pack station. By 1981, packing was no longer a career the way it had been for generations until the 1940s and 50s. By then it had become a young man's game, for a young man beholden to no one, with no attachments and no worries.

Maybe Denise had been right. Maybe it had all amounted to the times we had spent together in bed, when she drank in the smell of horses off my skin and I buried my face in the perfume of her hair; when for a few hours each day the world disappeared and all that existed was her body and mine wrestling together while the phone rang and went unanswered, and people knocked and were ignored, and the sun set and yet the lights stayed off, and we remained totally alone and oblivious to anything but each other. For

me, then, the surrounding city and its millions of people, for a while at least, ceased to exist.

After Ruth left I saw her presence everywhere I looked. In place of rock and sage she had cleaned out and replanted the flower beds around the cookhouse and the south side of the barn, reworking the ground with manure from behind the corral to the consistency of a rich dark mulch. Inside the cookhouse, bright calico curtains sewed with edges of lace hung in place of the old window shades. Mason jars full of dried flowers remained untouched on the table. With the sudden appearance of light, the man-cave atmosphere of the dining room gave way to striking views of the eastern canyon and the cliff faces toward the west. But most of all it was the smell of her hair that remained on my pillow, reminding me of what I was sure, then, I had lost.

Three weeks later, on one of the last big packing days before the advent of hunting season, Danny was scheduled to go out with a party of four into the Clark Fork Basin. Benny was headed out with a party of Los Angeles Sheriff's Department Swat Team members who wanted to scout the country around Rae Lakes and Donahue Pass for mule deer. And I was to follow in two days with a party of five men who planned to do a week's fishing at Rodger's Lakes. Paul and a full string of mules were headed for MacClure Lake and wouldn't be back for two days.

As I walked to the cookhouse in the dark that morning, I noticed that Paul's truck was missing. Inside, everyone was helping themselves to bowls of cereal and Merle, in an apron, was busy making sandwiches out of American cheese, mayonnaise, white bread and bologna. The old pack station standby.

Taking off my coat, I looked down at the bowls of cold cereal. “Denise up yet?” I asked.

Merle looked over at me with a spatula in his hand loaded with mayonnaise. “You take a while to figure some things out, don’t you?” He resumed his sandwich making while the others over at the table remained quiet. Benny was the first to speak up.

“She packed up and quit last night and headed down to Bishop.”

I asked Merle if Paul knew, seeing as how he was away in the backcountry.

“Hell if I know,” he yelled, throwing his spatula in the sink. “I doubt it or he woulda stayed and try to talk her out of it. All I know is she didn’t give any notice and this isn’t going to be pretty if I can’t find someone to replace her real quick.”

The truth was that Merle did know why she left, he simply would not yet admit it to himself or anyone else. A week earlier, now that the weather had gotten colder, Shirley had moved back to Bishop, and with Ruth gone that left Denise as the only female. Day and night she continued not only to cook but to try and keep up the better standard of fare that had come as a result of Ruth’s involvement in the kitchen. Then one evening, while Merle sat alone and tired and hungry beside a small fire in the backcountry, on one of those rare occasions when he had to take out a string by himself, he had unwrapped a chicken sandwich Denise had prepared for his trip the day before. After his second bite he looked down and saw that the chicken was still raw and bloody. With the sandwich sizzling to ashes in the fire, Merle made do that night with just a candy bar and a half-full canteen of tepid water.

Back at the pack station, rather than pulling her aside to tell her how he felt, he told everyone that night around the table in the cookhouse. From the kitchen, Denise watched Paul laughing along with the others, and the first thing we all heard was the slamming of the screen door at the rear of the kitchen followed by the sound of Paul's truck spraying gravel out of the driveway. Not knowing right off how to react, Paul sat staring into his coffee and listened along with the rest of us to the sound of the truck's engine fading away into the distance. A few tense hours went by before the truck pulled back into the pack station, and after some heated words between Denise and Merle they had both given in and made some sort of peace with one another.

Now that she was apparently gone good, there was no doubt among any of us that Merle's criticism of her cooking, no matter how justified, had been the final straw. With the threads holding her to her job already strained, it had simply taken a few extra days, and Paul's absence, for her to work up the courage to move out.

Before leaving the dining room that same morning we were interrupted by someone knocking on the cookhouse door. Outside on the steps stood a distraught backpacker—a young, skinny, bearded man in his late teens or early twenties who had camped the night before near the trailhead fifty yards behind the pack station. During the night his dog had apparently wandered over and run into Oscar, the rattlesnake that lived under my room. In the time it took for us to grab our coats, we all ran from the cookhouse and stood at the man's campsite with our hands in our pockets, not knowing what to do or say. The small brown dog was convulsing, its face and tongue swollen to twice their normal size. Both

its nostrils and now its throat were swelling shut. As the dog gasped for air, the young backpacker knelt at its side, crying. Within twenty minutes the dog was dead.

Although Merle and Benny and I offered what comfort we could, none of us admitted knowing about Oscar. Instead, we helped pack the man's tent, and when he was on his way up the trail we buried his dog behind a stand of aspens on the hillside. After tamping down the dirt and building a small cairn of rocks over the grave, I hiked down alone to a group of cars parked below the trailhead and hung the dog's collar with the two brass, bone-shaped tags over the man's side view mirror. Already it had been a long day, and the sun had not yet cleared the eastern horizon.

Within the next hour we caught up a string of mules, loaded them, and sent Danny on his way for an overnight trip to the Clark Basin to resupply a Sierra Club base camp with fresh groceries. Included in one of the loads was a box of twenty-four Cornish game hens, packed in dry ice, and a case of wine, both of which were a surprise gift from a newly-married spouse who was unable to make the trip.

When Merle and I lifted the last box, he snickered, "Now that's love, my boy. You oughta take note of stuff like this."

"Why are you telling me?" I asked, not wanting a lecture, especially one about relationships. "I wouldn't have thought you'd seen Ruth as anyone's catch."

But oblivious to how I felt, Merle climbed on his soapbox.

"Every man has one great woman who walks into his life, and it's his job to grab a hold of her and not let go no matter what," he said, throwing the tarp over the load and walking to the other side to tie his diamond hitch.

"A great woman, even?" I said, surprised.

“Well, understand that most of us only come to realize this later in life, when we’re married to someone else. When in our hearts we know we ain’t with the one who was our first choice, or even our second or third.”

Full of unimpeachable knowledge, Merle was all smiles, although I could have reminded him about Denise. I threw my diamond and tossed him back the rope. This wasn’t a conversation I wanted to be having, not now, not today. I already felt bad enough.

When Danny was on his way, I went back to my room and changed clothes. I was not scheduled to go out with a pack-string again until Tuesday morning, when I was to take the party of five into the area around Rodger’s Lakes. It had been a long week, with little sleep and long hours, and I was worn out. We had all made several trips over the pass in addition to our regular chores, and when I told Merle that my dog and I were going to head into June Lake for a few hours, he said to go ahead and take the rest of the day off. I didn’t need any persuading.

Back then I drove a old red step-sided Ford pickup with a camper shell. It wasn’t the best-looking truck on the road, but it started regardless of the weather and it took me and all of my worldly possessions where I needed to go.

When I started the engine, the cassette player picked up where it had been, with Merle Haggard singing some song or another about misery and lonesomeness. The empty road ahead was covered with yellow leaves. At one point several deer and, moments later, a grouse hen and three of her chicks, crossed and then disappeared among the bank of aspens that lined the highway.

In town I parked on main street in front of Ernie's Tackle Shop. With the rising of the afternoon wind, the fishermen began to leave the lakes and head for the campgrounds, leaving behind a trail of water on the asphalt from their trailered boats. Outside the store, a bulletin board displayed photographs of several dozen people holding up strings of fish, the results of a fishing tournament that had taken place in August where the object had been to win a cash reward for catching one of ten trout marked and released with metal gill tags. No one had won, but many of the fish were of good size.

After studying the faces of the people in the photographs, I walked down to June Lake grocery. Inside the store the air smelled like cooked chicken. Near the cash register two local drunks were laughing about a friend who had been arrested and jailed the previous night, and the slowest on his feet after the three of them were pulled over for reckless driving. As I walked up and down the narrow aisles, creaking the wooden floorboards, I felt the strangeness of being in such a public place after a summer in the mountains, where even the magazine rack was a disturbing burst of color and faces. The Dairy Gold deliveryman from Bishop was on his knees restocking the cooler with milk, the bread man from Shatzs' Bakery was unloading racks of loaves onto shelves, and the grocer was spraying the miniscule produce section with water. In the end, I grabbed a newspaper I did not intend to read, a loaf of Sheep Herder bread and a fifth of Jack Daniels, and asked for one of the chickens a woman was transferring from the broiler into a brightly-lit case roofed by heat lamps.

Back in my truck, with Merle singing a new song, this time about love lost, I drove the loop road out to highway 395. Turning north, the highway curved for several miles before I pulled off onto a narrow dirt road that headed straight out across the desert, to a

place I had seen on my ride back from the hospital with Ruth. In spite of the washouts and the rocks, I drove faster and faster, feeling as though I were leaving something behind in the high plume of dust billowing in the air behind my truck.

Five miles out, I slid to a stop and watched in my rear view mirror as the dust enveloped and then settled on my truck and filtered through the open windows. Now, early in the evening, I sat alone with Cleo as the shadows spread across the desert from the foothills of the Sierra. The Merle Haggard tape continued to play the same woeful country songs over and over. Fifty yards away a bullet-riddled Desoto, brown with rust, lay half-buried in the sand. Most likely it was the home of a kangaroo rat, from whose burrow in the coming darkness there would be its furtive, solitary journeys to gather seeds. Somewhere out there too were the desert sidewinders, the coyotes, and the owls who all would be looking for the darting rodent now burrowed beneath the sand and metal. Another fifty yards away a creosote bush cast its dying shadow across a barren ground. I was aware, at least for a moment, of being precisely where I had always wanted to be, lost somewhere out in the flat nothingness of the California/Nevada desert.

I ate hungrily, washing down the food with large pulls from the bottle. From where Ruth sat three weeks earlier, Cleo watched me tear off pieces of the meat and wrap them in the good, sourdough bread. I made a plate for her out of the paper sack, and shared with her the skin and strips of meat, but as the whiskey took over, and the music continued to play, and darkness descended, I began to feel empty and forgotten.

Outside my window, a late-evening breeze stirred the vague silhouettes of several tumbleweeds. I rummaged through my glove box and found a tape Ruth had given me one day in the city, a live Grateful Dead recording from a New Years Eve concert at the

Winterland Ballroom. As Jerry Garcia's voice filled the cab of the truck, and spilled out into the surrounding brush, I opened the door and walked out across the sand and over to a low nearby hill, carrying the bottle and a blanket. Through fifty yards of twilight, I could see Cleo watching me from the truck.

I had left the door open and the tape playing, and from where I sat among the rabbit and sagebrush I watched the sky darken and the first stars appear. The Dead sang Ripple in the distance, but it was the same sad tale of misery and loneliness I'd heard from Merle. They were all songs about loss and disappointment. Red neck or hippie—what's the difference, I wondered, taking another long pull from the bottle. It's all just sad sad words and nothing more, the things we say and do to each other and to ourselves. Cleo trotted up and lay by my side. I wrapped myself tighter in the blanket and leaned back on my elbows and, stabbing the half-empty bottle into the sand, I swore at myself, at Ruth, at the stars, at my life. With the tape still playing, I curled up in my blanket and fell asleep.

When dawn broke I walked back to find a dead battery. The air was cold and clear and many of the stars still glittered in the sky. Inside the truck, Cleo slept on the pile of ropes and gloves and jackets I had piled on the floor. I went through the truck looking for water but found none, only the crumbs and bones from the night before. As it had at sunset, the wind began to pick up and blow over the desert. Off in the distance the lights of the semis and cars on the highway formed a string along the base of the mountains. Whistling for Cleo, I wrapped the blanket around my shoulders and stumbled off in the direction of town.

When I walked into the cookhouse five hours later, Merle looked at me with his eyebrows raised. “Have a good time?” he asked, as I dropped into a chair. I was covered with dirt and bits of brush and looked like hell. “Yeah, great. Peachy,” I answered.

A new cook eyed me from the kitchen door, a single mother named Karen I had done some shoeing for early in the season. Merle poured me a cup of coffee.

“You sort things out?”

I looked past him and down the length of the room and out the window. Outside a magpie was robbing from the songbird’s hanging wire cage of suet. I didn’t answer him. I was trying instead to remember the name of the young woman’s daughter—a thin, blond, ten-year-old who wanted to be a barrel racer. The two separate occasions the three of us spent under the big cottonwood tree while I worked on the girl’s horse were the most enjoyable hours I’d had shoeing so far that season.

“Okay. Listen,” Merle said, picking up with business. “I have a group of guys I’m not sure about.” He brought his coffee cup over and sat across from me at the table. “But they’re paid in full. If they show up, it’s a trip to Rodger’s Lakes basin. You’ll drop them off and come back out the next day, and I’ll have Danny go back in next Sunday and pick em up.”

“What do you mean not sure about?” I asked. Because my primary job was to stay at the pack station and work at my anvil, this sort of quick in-and-out foray into the wilderness was about all of the backcountry time I got. We called these trips “drop camps,” since we typically packed the parties and their things in one day, unloaded and spent the night together around a campfire, and then rode out alone and empty early the

next morning, with the plan to return for pick up at the end of a specified period of time.

In this case, five days.

Running a finger around the rim of his cup, he thought for a minute before answering. “Well, they seem a little squirrely. They don’t seem to know a whole lot about camping out. Anyway,” he sighed, placing his palms flat on the table, “if this trip happens, you’re going to need five mules, plus the five horses they’ll be riding, plus your horse. That means you’ll be coming out with eleven head. Think you can do that?”

What was I going to say? At this point I didn’t care one way or another about much of anything, except getting a real night’s sleep, taking a long hot shower, and coming up with a good idea of what I was going to do with the rest of my life. But first I needed something to eat. When I looked back toward the kitchen, Karen was already heading out through the door with a plate of homemade crab enchiladas and a glass of fresh orange juice. Denise’s cooking was suddenly a distant memory.

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The following morning, the sun was high and the air already warming when the five men pulled into the pack station and sat down at the table for a long breakfast of pancakes and omelets and a variety of fresh fruits. Coworkers from a publishing outfit in Pasadena, they had talked for years about taking a backcountry trip together to fish and lounge around a campfire for a few days without their wives. During our introductions it became clear that Merle was right, none of the men had any outdoor experience. The trip was the result of a long-standing dare that had turned somehow from a whimsical joke to reality. While they ate, Benny and I quickly packed their gear, along with their food and one of Merle's canvas wall tents. Inside the cookhouse, their laughter ticked away the minutes we should have been hustling up the trail.

At eleven-thirty we finally began to fit each man to his saddle, shortening and lengthening their stirrups, while deciding which horse would be best suited for each rider. Within only a few minutes, I realized that none of them had any knowledge of horses, either. They each stepped tentatively onto the plywood sissy box to reach their stirrups. None of them stopped to check their cinches. And once in the saddle they held their reins chest high and separated like divining rods. One man, who wore a pale blue Oxford shirt with a button-down collar, complained about how cold it had been during the night, even though, as Merle pointed out, they had spent the night in warm beds in a motel.

"It's going to be a lot colder where you're going," Merle added, reluctantly.

When they explained that their wives thought they wouldn't be tough enough for a week-long fishing trip in the back country, Benny and I looked at each other and winced.

As I led the way out of the pack station an hour later I had a feeling it was going to be a lot like my trip with the Brownie Scouts. But this time, not only was I heading toward the steep switchbacks ahead of the pass, I had my hands full with my mules, who were loaded down with an inordinate amount of dunnage. In addition to the usual things people take, the men had brought a large table and chairs, a fifty gallon propane tank, and a pancake griddle the size of a small desktop, as well as enough food and liquor to last several weeks. Without another packer to help on the trail with both men and material, it was shaping up to be a long day.

For the first thousand yards the light-hearted chatter among my riders continued, but as the vertical wall of Angel's Flight rose before us, the men grew quiet. I stopped to check the balance of my loads, then lied, telling them that the next half mile was not as dangerous as it looked. "Just keep your eyes on the trail and, remember, none of these horses you're riding wants to fall any more than you do."

My false words of encouragement, however, were soon forgotten. Once I was satisfied that the cinches were tight and the loads balanced, I got back on my horse and moved out. On the second narrow switchback, when only four or five feet separated the cliff face on our left from a thousand foot drop to our right, a gust of wind blew down from the pass, scattering gravel from the trail and from the overhanging ledges and crags above our heads.

Suddenly, the man who had complained of the cold announced that he was going to get off his horse and walk.

I froze. *Oh, shit.* I thought. *This can't be happening. Not here.*

Turning around in my saddle, I yelled back into the wind over the tops of my mules that we couldn't stop. But when I kept going he threw down his reins and yelled back that he was getting off anyway, and in six or seven long strides he was by my side, demanding that I dismount. Glancing back in horror, I saw his horse beginning to turn and head for home.

In a split second the bold banner of a newspaper headline flashed through my mind: **Tragedy in the Sierras.** I saw Sheriff's deputies and rangers and ambulances with their flashing lights heading for the trailhead. I pictured days spent by men rappelling from the side of the trail collecting fishing gear and cameras and sleeping bags and the scattered pieces of packsaddles from the stiffening bodies of dead mules and horses. I saw weeping wives and sons and daughters. Most of all I saw the end of Merle's business disappear into the thin air of the mountains along with the lives of the four men still mounted behind me.

"Here," I yelled, handing him my reins. "Hold these and don't let go."

Swinging my leg off the cliff side of my horse, I gingerly worked my way back down the string of mules, praying that they wouldn't spook, and managed to grab the man's horse before it could escape down the trail. There I was able to talk the last man in line into leading the riderless horse by its lead rope.

Back at the head of the line, I helped the man in the Oxford shirt onto my horse, and made her the lead animal of a six member string by tying off my lead mule to my saddle. From there to the top of the pass, as he closed his eyes and gripped the horn of his saddle, I led him the rest of the way on foot.

Since I had planned on riding both in and out, I had worn my cowboy boots—footwear about as useful for long distance, high-altitude climbing as ski boots or slippers. Now I found myself hiking one mile after another, hoping with each step that the man on my horse had gained more confidence on the less-frightening terrain beyond the pass. And yet, steadfastly refusing to get back on his own horse, he insisted that I lead him from the ground the rest of the way to camp, another fourteen miles over the horizon. When I looked up in disbelief, I saw that he had begun to cry.

For the next four hours, as my feet began to blister, we rode and walked in silence. I stopped occasionally to check my loads, but even though the other four men seemed to be tolerating the ride, it was decided among them that we keep going and forgo a lunch break to get the ride over with as soon as possible. Mile after mile the trail continued to wind among boulders and scree, often switchbacking up and down various small ridges and moraines. When the man's butt became saddle sore, he demanded to have his prior saddle switched to my horse, reminding me for the third or fourth time that day that he was helping to pay for this trip, that I was not, and that I was to do as I was told. After swapping saddles, I got him back up on my horse, but within a mile or two, when his own saddle proved to be just as uncomfortable, he resumed his quiet weeping, vowing to never again suffer another trip into the mountains.

Until we pulled into camp around eight that night, the others avoided eye contact, saying nothing. There was none of that usual mindless ribbing and banter that serves so well as a social lubricant and passer of time. Only the clapping of hooves and the creak of saddles and cinches broke the silence as camp drew near.

When I finally helped the man down from my horse at the end of our ride, he withdrew under a tree and sat facing away from the rest of us as a Clark's Nutcracker, a large gray jay known as "the camp robber," squawked at him from a bare branch above his head.

Their campsite was back about fifty yards from the west end of the largest of the Rodger's Lakes. Since it was used several times a year, a blackened ring of rocks and a leftover pile of firewood remained near the center of camp. Now as the sun sank closer to the horizon, and the air had grown colder, none of them seemed either willing or able to light a fire. I realized then that these men needed even more help than either Merle or I had imagined. As I began to unload my mules, I was tempted to let them fend for themselves, especially after walking in on foot.

Although the usual role of a packer taking a party to a drop camp was simply to transport people and their things into or out of the woods, who I was and what I stood for as a person and how much I owed to Merle's reputation seemed to be on the line. If I allowed five men from the city who had chosen to get into this mess to sink or swim, as it were, maybe they would be better off in the long run. Besides, I had eleven head of pack animals to care for. While gathering up the pack saddles and placing them under a tarp for the night, it was something to think about.

A small cliff-enclosed draw off to the north about a hundred yards contained a moderate amount of grass, a place I had spotted when we arrived and it was still light enough to see. Leading the animals there in the dark, I hung a large cowbell from Snowball's neck and turned her and the others loose. Before me, many in the small herd dropped to their knees and began to roll.

At the entrance to this draw was a bottleneck narrowing where I lay my tarp, and after taking off my boots and pants, I climbed into my sleeping bag and lay looking up at the stars. Back in camp it remained dark and quiet. In the nearby grass, the soft sound of the bell in among the grazing mules and horses formed a kind of packer's lullaby, a whispered tune that all was well. With the lunch Karen put together fourteen hours earlier still in my saddle bag, I fell asleep.

All of a sudden I awoke to the *ding ding ding* of Snowball's rapidly approaching bell, followed by the sound of pounding hooves and the *huff huff huff huff* of large animals' sucking wind. Jumping from my sleeping bag in my boxer shorts and socks, I ducked as mules exploded past on either side, then ran blindly through the dark after the sound of the bell. A minute went by before I realized that my feet were sloshing through something slushy and cold, that sometime during the night it had begun to snow.

With a thick cloud cover now blocking out the moon and the stars, I continued to run and crawl through absolute darkness with no idea of what I was running into or toward. But just as suddenly as it had all begun, the bell mare stopped. Grabbing her tail, I ran my hands up her side until I got a hold of her halter, and after turning her around and walking back toward the draw in my socks, I heard the other mules and horses begin to turn and follow. The men, who had settled on crackers and a bottle of brandy for their supper, had slept through it all.

Back in the little draw, while the other horses and mules went back to grazing, I sat on a dry rock beneath a tree holding Snowball's lead rope. Soon the sky began to clear, and as the starlight shone down on the snow the air grew even colder.

Against the backdrop of the Milky Way, the tiny dot of a satellite crossed from east to west, followed minutes later by another traveling in the same direction. When an airplane's blinking lights crossed overhead from the direction of San Francisco and toward the distant ridgeline where the sun would rise, I imagined Ruth in a seat by the window. I closed my eyes and saw her reach up and turn off her light, then look out her window and down at the dark cipher of the Sierra in the moonlight. A stranger sitting beside her squinted over her shoulder and jut out a chin, gesturing. "Anything down there?" he asked. And I imagined her not knowing what to say—that there was just snow, or mountains, or perhaps nothing at all, that it was just a wasteland of rock and water and gnarled pines wresting what little substance could be had from the decomposing granite and sands glaciers had left behind. Or, instead, that there were things the two of them couldn't see, like horses and mules and people, hidden below in the darkness, things she knew were probably there, in among that galaxy of alpine plant and animal life that thrived in spite of the bitter cold. As I wondered how she would answer, I decided, finally, that it didn't matter; and the inside of the airplane soon faded to the same semi-darkness as the land before me, where Snowball pulled at the frozen grass.

Another hour or two went by, during which the vague and fantastic forms of things and animals appeared and then vanished among the trees and rocks as the moonlight came and went with each passing cloud. Wrapped in my sleeping bag, still holding Snowball's lead, I imagined that I saw Norman Clyde standing a few yards away among the rocks and shadows. Like Ruth, he too was warm and dry and fed, but, unlike me, had no animals to worry about, and in spite of my ribs and feet and frozen hands, I managed

to laugh. That lucky, self-sufficient man, still haunting my memory and life with his solitude, no longer bent beneath the weight of his enormous pack and tragic memories and awful loneliness.

Soon Snowball and the mules bedded down and the sound of her bell and their grazing gave way to silence. What I took to be the shape of Norman remained motionless, staring at me, the white light reflecting off the snow upon his face and hands, as the red campfire light had on those starry summer nights when he crouched with us around the bonfires and held out his hands to feel the warmth.

It had been warm, almost hot, on those August days when I watched him show me how to tie the flies and lures on the end of my lines, and when he later called me over to see how he positioned each piece of firewood before coming down with his hatchet and splitting the wood with one perfect stroke. "Not like this, like this," he said, turning the wood. "The wood has a grain, the way God intended. Look."

I looked over in the direction of where the men lay sleeping. And as dawn began to form a faint line of light along the eastern horizon, I watched his form disappear and become a bush.

When they awoke they sat up in their wet sleeping bags and stared dumbly at their winter camp. One by one, they turned their eyes toward me but said nothing, believing, I supposed, that I was responsible for everything that had occurred so far on their great adventure: the cliff before the pass at Angel's Flight, the soreness of their butts, their lack of fire, and now the snow. I had become nothing more than a kid in his mid-twenties who had single-handedly ruined the trip of a lifetime for five grown men.

While Snowball and the bedded mules continued to doze, I collected dry wood from beneath the trees, walked the hundred yards to camp, and built a fire. One of the other men joined me, and together we rummaged through their belongings until we found a coffee pot. By eight o'clock, amid the rising smoke and the crackle from the dampened wood, he and I finished setting up their camp.

With the rising of the sun the snow began to melt and it wasn't long before the pack animals were up and grazing. The last man up was the man I had led on foot to camp the day before. Now he stood with the others beneath the flap of the wall tent with a cup of coffee in his hand, looking out with the rest of us at the view out over the lake. He turned to me and said softly, "I'm sorry about yesterday."

"Don't worry it," I said. "Look at where you are." Before us, on the surface of the lake, widening rings from rising trout began to dimple the water.

Back in the narrow draw, it took me another hour to catch up and load the mules with their empty pack saddles. Before leaving for home I walked back over to camp, where we shook hands and drank one more cup of coffee while we stood together and watched the trout continue to rise. The man who had apologized sat on the ground fumbling through a pile of newly purchased fishing poles and tackle. The tags were still attached and everything remained wrapped in plastic or sealed in their original bags.

I looked off at the lake, knowing that I would need to be on the trail if I was going to make it back to the pack station by nightfall. Beside me, the man sat holding a reel and one section of a spin casting rod with a look of bewilderment on his face. "Here," I said,

sitting beside him, and he handed me the sections of the rod and I began fitting them together.

It wasn't such a bad set up once it was assembled. I stepped outside the tent fly and lightly whipped the tip of the rod up and down, feeling the limber shaft of fiberglass vibrate as if a fish were tugging on the line. Below us on the lake a sudden light breeze rippled the surface of the water, erasing the rises and the reflection of the nearby forest and peaks. As occasional bits of cloud passed overhead, small shadows raced across the land and water and then disappeared. *I'll bet that lake is loaded*, I thought to myself. *And a good day too, with the wind roughing up the water, just the way the fish like it.*

I turned to look back at the man. "Get your stuff," I said, surprising him and me both. "Let's get some breakfast."

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When I finally left the lake that day it was almost two o'clock. The trip down the mountain was rough going. The freak, early-season snowfall the night before had blown in with a cold front that had moved down from the Gulf of Alaska. With the partial clearing of the sky early in the morning, the wet snow had thawed but now refrozen, forming a thin layer of ice over the exposed rock along the trail. With their smooth, caulkless steel shoes, the pack stock slipped with each step. From time to time some of them stumbled and fell, dislodging their empty pack saddles, and I was forced to dismount and work my way back down alongside my pack string to whichever animal had a saddle askew.

The hours passed slowly. Through the forest, and in the lee of the high summits and ridges, snow still covered the trail. As I searched for my way down the mountain, I slowly made my way from one tree blaze to the next, often having to stop and backtrack when I'd misinterpreted lightening wounds or avalanche scars on the bark of trees as hatchet marks. We were traveling no faster than a man would walk, and by late afternoon I had still six miles to go before I was within striking distance of home.

By 5 pm, on a warm light breeze, a bank of clouds moved in abruptly from the west. As the temperature rose, visibility was soon reduced to thirty or forty yards, and by six o'clock once again it began to snow.

At first the thin layer of snowfall on the trail, like a few inches of dirt or sand, was no more hazardous than dry ground. But soon the wind began to pick up and the snow came down harder, blowing in horizontally from the west, further obliterating the trail.

As the sun fell behind the mountains, the temperature plummeted. I had on only a thin blue jean jacket in addition to my jeans and socks and boots. The leather gloves I had worn during the night were still wet and made my hands feel colder than if I were wearing no gloves at all. Even if I could follow the blazes on the trees to the top of the pass, I now began to wonder about the likelihood of making it down Angel's Flight in the dark.

Then I had an idea. Each time I had taken a trip into the back country, I looked with longing at the camp where Howard Fry and I had dropped off the load of supplies for Red Ballinger and his son and their crew of college kids. Ahead just a mile or two was where they had camped in a clump of wind-bent junipers near the outlet of the next lake. With the wind blowing harder and the snow now coming down in earnest, I struck out cross country in the direction of their former camp site.

This time I took no chances with the pack animals running away. When I arrived, I tied each of the pack animals in my string to a picket line, and before the sky grew dark, I quickly gathered dry wood from under neighboring trees and made a fire.

It was then, when I settled on the dry ground beneath a tree, that I remembered the lunch I still had in my saddle bag from the day before, the one Karen had put together and handed up to me with a smile as I left the pack station. I dug beneath one of the manties that covered a pile of saddles, found my lunch, and returned to the warmth of the fire.

Karen had packed a lot into one sack: A large hunk of home-baked sourdough, a thick wedge of Gouda, an apple and orange, several candy bars and a fresh can of Copenhagen—guessing, I suppose, that I'd need a little something to top off my lunch as

I rode off down the trail during the light of day. Her daughter, Meghan, had doodled a border around the edge of the sack, and in pencil her mother had written “Good Luck.”

Breaking off a piece of bread and raising my cup of water to the darkness, I looked down at the firelight against the snow, at the steam slowly rising from my boots and legs, and suddenly the night didn’t seem so cold. Among the brilliant flames of purple and blue and orange, several knots of wood, heavy with pitch, flared over a growing bed of coals—a bed of coals no different from the ones I made in my forge. I realized then that what I’d started and carried with me from job to job, as a shoer—from the busiest cities along the coast to the highest out-of-the-way trailheads and ranches—had been the fire I’d remembered holding my hands out to as a kid, the one Norman had taught me to light and feed and tend, that connected me to my memory of a life in the mountains.

That was the first of many bivouacs I was to have over the years after being stopped by either weather or darkness in the backcountry of the Sierra. But it was the one I will remember the most fondly—a night spent pitching small pieces of wood into a fire from where I lay curled up on my side beneath a tree, eating bread and cheese and the segments of an orange with the smell of fish strong on my hands. It was also when I decided that I could live out where Norman had lived, but do even better, by spending my off seasons in the Owens Valley, in Bishop, earning a living as a blacksmith, and getting to know a young girl whose goal was to become a barrel racer, and her mother, a woman who understood why I was there and where I needed to be. Later, when the sky cleared, looking up again at the same stars I had seen the night before, I followed the course of the same pair of satellites. But this night there were no airplanes.